

Flipside II:
From the Plains of Metamor

By Byron W. Scott

Running like lemmings straight for the sea

On a wide, easy road, it's the majority

It's so hard to break momentum

And step out of line

It's a lonesome road to walk

It you want to seek life

But you'd better start right now

Because we haven't much time

And that opening to life

Is so very hard to find

--excerpts from the Songs of Long Road

by C.L. Walker--

1 Bonnie/Flipside

A Salvador Dali?

It would have been a distinct possibility if not for one vital fact--she was not staring at a canvass. The scene before her was real. And she was a part of the reality.

She was standing on a vast, flat plain; a cream colored, synthetic surface much like formica. It gave off an eerie glow under a cloudless, steel-gray sky. Breaking the smooth, artificial surface was a long, jagged chasm, a gaping crevice that

stretched between horizons. It was wide and dark where it passed in front of her. In the remote distance three pyramid shaped mountains flanked the opposite side of the incredible fissure. Feeling compulsively drawn to the edge of the chasm, she gazed into the absorbing darkness. The billowing blue smoke was utterly deep, fathomless.

It was calling to her. And it was unbearably enticing.

She jumped.

A ticklish pull from her midsection greeted her. But the pleasing, impish feeling soon turned to alarm when the sensation continued to intensify. It spread to every part of her being, gnawing at her, consuming her from the inside.

She attempted to scream but failed to summon so much as a whimper. Terror gripped her and it continued to escalate as her further frantic efforts resulted in nothing more than maddening silence.

Panic-stricken, she awoke with a start.

2 Flipside

It felt good to stretch his limbs.

Even though his thoughts were as thick and cumbersome as the swirling gray fog that surrounded him, he felt physically stronger. He knew his rest had been beneficial.

He breathed deep the crisp, pine scented air and then began to slowly make his way down the steep, wooded slope. When he stepped from the forest into a golden

brown meadow, the stifling mist thinned and a spectacular panorama opened up before his eyes.

It was a stunningly beautiful valley, fifty miles or more across at its widest point.

The north side was opened up and veered away in a broad plain a mile or so below him, broken here and there by a low, lonely mountain. The two remaining directions consisted of tall, rugged ranges. The highest peaks were snow covered. The one nearest him was actively volcanic and spouted ominous spurts of smoke.

But the most compelling feature of the valley lay at the foot of the opposite range. It was a sky blue lake that flashed and sparkled in the sunlight. Near one end was a large island, linked to the mainland by three long causeways that reached out like spokes to the north, south, and west.

Where in the blazes am I? He wondered. How did I get here?

As if in answer to his unspoken question came the sound of a strange, grating voice. "Welcome to the Conquest! Before you lay the Valley of Mexico and the island/city of Tenochtitlan; the jewel of the New World!"

Surprised by the voice, the man turned to discover an unusually large parrot eyeing him from a perch in a tree. It was a strikingly beautiful bird, resplendent in its rich, green plume.

"My name is Mochni. Mochni, the parrot. And yours?"

His own name?

What exactly WAS his name? Did he even have one? He was not able to think clearly. There was a disconcerting gap in his continuity that he simply could not access. He could remember nothing before his initial appearance on the mountainside!

"Never mind. It's not really important," the bird consoled. "After all, what's in a name? You are you! Right?"

"I am a wanderer," the man hastily replied, wary of the bird's patronizing manner.

"You are a man of wisdom!" Mochni gleefully responded. "And you have arrived at the most opportune moment! We are about to witness the fall of Tenochtitlan and the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the world!"

The wanderer felt a tug of apprehension as he attempted to fit himself into the time frame.

"Is that truly the Aztec capital in the valley below?" he weakly asked. He wondered why he could remember his History when he couldn't remember his name. He was well versed in the lore of the Aztecs. Could he have actually traveled into the past?

"The Conquest is taking place at this very moment," the parrot wheezed. "You should take advantage of your good fortune and project yourself over the city."

Noting the pitiful look of despair on the wanderer's face, Mochni prodded him. "Go ahead. I know you can do it. Walk the sky! I will be your guide. Give you history from a bird's eye point of view, so to speak. You can trust me."

Stricken by those last words, the wanderer wavered. Could he truly trust the parrot? Mochni's eyes betrayed keen intelligence, but they also cast a sinister glint. And the grating, mocking tone of voice had put him on edge from the very beginning. Still, he couldn't deny that he harbored a compelling desire to see Tenochtitlan up close.

The wanderer's indecisiveness ceased to matter when he discovered that he had already begun to walk the sky. Even though he was standing in the meadow, he was also flying with the parrot. Even though he was a man, and not a bird, still he was soaring through the air, gleefully riding the wind currents down the side of the mountain.

When they reached the valley floor and neared the shoreline of the lake, a giant clamor caught his attention. The water surrounding the city was literally teeming with canoes. There were thousands of them filled with warriors battling one another. From six or seven larger, more cumbersome boats came the flash of fire and the roar of cannon. A full-fledged battle was in progress.

The wanderer watched the desperate, determined fighting along the causeways and at the main gates of the city. And though it was mostly native fighting native, he took special note of the Spaniards fighting bravely on their horses, confident in

their armor. Musket shot pocked the air. The banner of Castile waved gloriously in the breeze.

Blood flowed freely.

"Noche triste, the Night of Sadness, is over," Mochni lamented. "Moctezuma is dead. Disease has swept Mexico. Cortes has returned for the final time and set siege to the city. It will be only a matter of days now until we see the end of this proud Aztec Empire."

Groans and rallying cheers ebbed and flowed as the two of them continued their flight across the water. The rhythms of drums, the blare of horns and conch shells, and the firing of musket and cannon intermingled to rake their senses. But when they reached the city proper, the awesome magnificence of the canals and gardens made the wanderer forget about the human carnage taking place outside the gates.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" Mochni shuddered with pride. "These ingenious people have reclaimed the land from Lake Texcoco and created the Venice of the New World! In fact, Venice pales in comparison with Tenochtitlan. Just marvel at the accomplishments! Absolutely astounding!"

They swept low over a ball court as they neared the ceremonial center, where the wanderer was swept by the grandeur and dwarfed by the immensity of the enormous pyramids and temples. At the same time, he was repulsed by the repugnant odor of dried blood that emanated from the main structure, the Templo Mayor. The stench was strong enough to overwhelm his sense of smell.

As they commenced to glide above the residential and market areas toward the sister city, Tlatelolco, the wanderer realized that the parrot was still speaking.

"...inspired stone carvings and murals...gardens radiating throughout the island...a paradise...the grand epitome of civilization. The largest city in the world! It was with my advice and influence that they attained such cultural heights, you know..."

But the wanderer was not interested in the bird's commentary, preferring instead to concentrate upon his own disturbing thoughts. He knew that the Aztecs had a thriving, vibrant society. They produced tremendous art and architecture, had an understanding of astronomy and a finely honed calendar. To witness it all first hand was deeply satisfying. And yet at the same time it was utterly distressing because this was their end. The whole city was in a spasmodic state of panic. Within a matter of days it would be reduced to rubble and plunder, the women raped, the surviving men crippled by the conquering horde.

He felt a penetrating shiver and then found himself back on the mountainside, gazing down upon the valley. Mochni was perched on the limb beside him.

"It's a shame, isn't it? Such a tragic shame," the parrot sadly commented. "My proud, powerful empire, my glorious Aztec civilization, over three-hundred years in the making, mind you, brought unmercifully to its knees in a matter of days. Hundreds of thousands of people slaughtered and humiliated, destroyed by a measly one thousand white men."

The parrot paused to let his words sink in, and then uttered an obscene, traitorous laugh. "Simply delicious, don't you think?"

The comment caught the wanderer by surprise. "I wasn't thinking that at all!" he stammered. He wondered if Mochni was truly aware of the events that were about to unfold. Or had the parrot deliberately led these people to the brink of disaster, as his callous tone suggested? "Did you know that this point in time was approaching?" the wanderer impetuously demanded.

"I grew giddy waiting for this moment," the bird replied with a sparkle in his eye.

The wanderer felt enraged. "In one hundred years this culture will be all but extinct, their spirit crushed! You could have prepared them to meet the challenge and instead you've led them to disaster!"

"How odd! You attack me and yet defend my followers."

"You filthy traitor," accused the wanderer. "I detest the loss of cultural diversity as much as environmental diversity."

Mochni spat on the ground. "Don't give me that self-righteous blather," he sneered. "With your arrival, I am no longer even needed here. You will do my work for me!"

"I did not come with Cortes!"

"You truly don't know yourself, do you?" the parrot countered. "Well, take a look, white boy! You are one of them. Do you hear me? You are a white man! It is your people who are responsible for this holocaust, not me. It is your people who bring misery, disease, and oppression. Not only will you exterminate the native population, but you'll crush the very spirit of the Earth in order to attain your cultural domination, the name of your game.

"As for you personally, mister man of knowledge, you don't even know your name. You have no idea who you are and yet you presume to judge me. Well, look at yourself before you judge anyone else, white boy."

His tirade over, the parrot cocked his head and waited for a reply.

Shocked and confused by the scathing accusations, the wanderer remained speechless.

"Now you've forgotten how to use your tongue as well," the bird taunted. "Well, I've got better things to do than wait for you to regain your senses. I'm sure we'll meet again. I just hope you're not so stupid then."

The wanderer watched in stupor as Mochni flapped his wings and flew off, gliding serenely into the valley. Smoke was rising from Tenochtitlan, making viewing hazy.

It's just as well, thought the wanderer. He was in no mood to watch the destruction anyway. The whole situation was appalling.

Confused and upset, he turned from the valley panorama and strode towards the pass in the mountains. He was well aware that he had let the distasteful parrot get to him. Still, he couldn't help but wonder whether or not Mochni was right. Did he share responsibility for the massacre?

No! The damn bird was wrong! How could he be responsible for what was happening to the Aztecs, or to any of the other Native Americans? He wasn't even from this time period. He was from the future! How else could he have knowledge of the outcome of the Conquest?

Why couldn't he remember his identity?

Distraught, he closed his eyes and clenched his fists, but as he stretched his arms toward the sky, a strong premonition forced him to reopen his eyes and re-examine his surroundings.

To his shocking surprise, he found himself balanced precariously on the edge of a smooth, rock ledge. Before him, the cliff fell away for almost a thousand feet. Fighting back his panic, he backed away firmly and methodically.

When he reached more comfortable footing, he glanced around and noticed a cluster of rock and adobe houses on top of a protruding mesa spur. There were people in the village, mostly women, who were attending to their daily routines; whitewashing walls, mending clothes, and preparing meals. Children were playing games, chasing one another, or helping with the chores.

It was mid-day, bright with a cloudless sky. A warm, steady breeze buffeted his face. It was obvious that he was no longer in the alpine region above Mexico City. The entire scope of the scenery had miraculously changed in the blink of an eye. How was it possible, he wondered? What had he done to accomplish such a feat?

A little girl popped up suddenly in front of him, and the questions were chased from his mind. He had been oblivious to her approach and her sudden appearance startled him.

She couldn't have been more than five years old. Except for a simple bead necklace that stood out prominently against her dark body, she was stark naked. She was also very nervous and fidgety. She kept her gaze on him at all times as if she was afraid to break eye contact.

He was becoming increasingly hypnotized by her stare. Her eyes were huge and round, dark and deep.

"Where am I?" he inquired, attempting to break her spell. "What is this place?"

The little girl wouldn't keep still. She arched her arms high behind her back and then, lifting her knees nearly to her chin, marched around him in an ever tightening circle. And then she dramatically unwound and shouted, "Oraibi, simpleton! Third Mesa! Don't you know? Aren't you our Friend?"

"Yes," he answered tentatively. "Of course I am."

She eyed him suspiciously and then began to circle around once again, hyperactively bending and contorting her body as she moved.

"The star has led us to the end of our migrations. The clans have completed their wanderings, and now we wait for the Creator to reveal the outcome of His plan."

She turned a cartwheel, coming frightfully close to the edge of the mesa.

"In the meantime, as you can see, things have gotten pretty ridiculous."

Ridiculous indeed, he nervously thought. Totally outrageous was more like it.

"Not me, silly. Everybody else!" she retorted as if she could read his thoughts.

"Come on, I'll show you."

He followed her into the village. His intentions were to be polite and friendly to everybody, but nobody paid him any attention. In fact, as they continued towards the square it became apparent that nobody besides the girl could even see him.

"See?" the little girl intoned. She continued to squirm and hop about as if she had to relieve herself. "Nobody even sees you! And they all think I'm the crazy one. They all say it, you know. 'Sparrow of the Broken Ledge is crazy, crazy. Crazy, crazy!'"

She continued her chant until they reached the edge of the ceremonial center, a fairly large area that contained six to eight kivas, seemingly spread haphazardly.

Hopi men were lazing about; some clothed in exotic, colorful garb, but most dressed in drab cotton or a mere loin cloth.

"Maybe one of these guys is smart enough to see you."

No sooner were the words out of her mouth when the wanderer noticed one of the men notice him. The man's expression of disbelief was unforgettable. Once the man composed himself, and made sure that the visitor was still watching, he strode purposefully towards the edge of the mesa and then tossed some kernels of corn into a pit. He picked up a fifteen-foot long pole, ten inches in diameter, as if it weighed nothing at all, and effortlessly began working it up and down in the pit, pulverizing the corn into meal.

The wanderer was amazed. It seemed beyond reason that the man could work the tall, cumbersome pole in such an easy manner. The post had to weigh more than the man himself!

The other men had joined together in a chant. The corn grinder eventually grew bored and left the pole standing in the hole. He gathered the chanters behind him and then led them past the wanderer in a single file. Each man passed with a quick, furtive glance, making sure to make eye contact.

The wanderer followed the line with his gaze. The withering, side winding motion reminded him of a snake. He saw each man dip a hand into a container of whitewash and then continue on to the edge of the mesa. When the last man

arrived, a command was given and, in unison, they began to wave their whitewashed hand in to the air, as if painting or rubbing an unseen object.

Bewildered, the wanderer questioned the little girl. "What are they doing?"

"Absolutely nothing," she dryly responded. "They merely show off for you. There is no purpose to what they do."

"But what do they think they're doing?" he pressed.

She directed his gaze across the valley floor to another mesa two or three miles away. At first glance he noticed nothing out of the ordinary, but as he continued to watch he saw an unmistakable whitewash spread slowly but distinctly across the other cliff side of the distant ridge. Seeming no less than a miracle, it completely mesmerized him.

The little girl was less fascinated.

"See what I mean?" she groaned, once again becoming animated. "There is no purpose to what they do. Whitewashing the cliff! The morons! With all this work to do in Oraibi, they have nothing better to do than their cheap, useless magic. They'd be better off if they looked to feeding themselves! Every year now more and more Tasavuh come to steal our maize. These men know that, and still they sit around all day like they're something special. And they call me crazy!"

Overcome with despondency, she stopped waving her arms and plopped to the ground in a heap.

"Only a one-heart can learn what they learn," she lamented. "But they lose direction so quickly! They all end up being a two-heart, and then they can't be trusted. They've regressed to spiteful witchcraft, shooting pellets of corn into people to make them sick or die. They've tried to do that to me, but I won't let them!"

"Can you walk the sky?" he asked.

"Walk the sky? P-tah!" She spat on the ground. "You ask such silly questions. Some of us can. But what good does it do to see Tasavuh coming? There is nothing we can do to prevent it."

A sudden urgency swept over her and she jumped to her feet. "Father says that YOU can renew our purpose, give us new direction that will make our efforts worthwhile. But you'll refuse to do it!" There was venom in her voice.

The wanderer stood immobilized, shocked by her sudden accusation.

"What's wrong with you anyway?" she scoffed as she once again began to circle him in a scrutinizing manner. "It's as if you can't remember or something. Is it because you are white? You are, aren't you? It's so hard to tell with you fading in and out like that!" She kicked dirt towards him in a spiteful manner. "Who are you, anyway?"

He stood dumbstruck as her question burned into his soul.

Who was he?

He didn't have a clue. And yet he clearly understood most of what he had witnessed. He was now at the Hopi mesas in northern Arizona, probably during the same time that Cortes was crushing the Aztecs. He had not seen any horses in or around the village. But while he could define his present place in the chronological order, he had no recollection of his personal history. Why? He did not know who he was or his purpose in being there. He simply could not remember.

Was he white? Mochni had made the same assertion. While he certainly wasn't the color of the whitewashed cliff, his skin was lighter than that of the little girl's. Did it even matter?

"Does Mochni appear to you here?" he asked, attempting to change the topic.

"The parrot? I have heard of him, but have never seen him. Don't worry. If he ever comes here, we will not be swayed by that evil spirit's voice. Everyone here is too lazy."

Sparrow's pessimism matched his own opinion. Mochni would have no reason to meddle with these people. Why should he? Even the Spaniards would overlook these unassuming clans living in the middle of a barren land. It would be the Hopi's salvation.

He numbly examined his outstretched arms. There was no use denying it. He was indeed a white man.

"You aren't going to help us, are you?" Sparrow admonished, half accusing, half pleading. A tear was in her eye.

"There is nothing I can do, little one. Absolutely nothing." Hell. He couldn't even remember his name! How could he hope to help these people?

He felt ashamed by his insensitive answer, but he felt that he owed her the truth. Finding nothing more to add, he turned to leave.

"Wait! Please don't go yet!"

She fidgeted with her necklace for a moment and then held out a huge paho, a prayer stick that was nearly twice the size of her own little body. He admired the large eagle feather that would carry her prayer/message to the sun.

"The prophecy has come true," she declared. "When our white Friend finally returned, he no longer knew who he was. My prayer is that you get well soon."

And then he felt a tremendous rush of wind, and the little girl was nowhere to be seen. Glancing up, he saw a sparrow soaring aloft, on its way to the sun.

Saddened and demoralized, the wanderer sat down on the edge of the mesa, oblivious to the surrounding men. He concentrated instead upon the intriguing purple mist that billowed up from the clear desert floor below. He solemnly waited for its arrival.

3 El Paso

"He hasn't regained consciousness at all?"

Bonnie sullenly glanced from Teresa, to Deanna, and then back to Jason. Her eyes were tired, bloodshot.

"He hasn't woken since you last saw him," she sighed, "just before they put him on the stretcher. The doctors say there's nothing they can do. Short of feeding him, there's no need of life support. CAT scan is negative, ICP normal. He checks out OK! They can't find anything seriously wrong."

Her eyes turned watery as she rambled.

"In fact, they say he's made a miraculous recovery. You can see that there's not a scratch left on him. Physically, he's healed himself! A parade of doctors have come and gone. They stand there and marvel, shake their heads, mumble 'amazing', 'incredible', but they don't know what to do, and he won't wake up, you know? He just won't wake up."

Her hands trembled as a tear rolled down her cheek. She threw herself into Jason's arms and gave him a tight embrace.

"I've been worried about you, too," she whispered. "What took y'all so long to get here?"

"Are you kidding? What a mess!"

Jason energetically stepped away, grateful for the opportunity to vent some frustration.

"Talk about the third degree! There was DEA, CIA, FBI, Texas Rangers, Park Rangers, local militia, you name it. County Sheriff, Mexican Federales, maybe more. The place was crawling with them. And they all wanted to know exactly what happened in our own words, ya know? As if we actually knew what the hell was going on. Man!

"And ya know what else? I couldn't believe it. What really pissed them off was that they didn't catch even one of the drug smugglers. Every single one of them bastards got away!"

"They didn't catch anybody?"

"Not a single one. So naturally they're all suspicious of us. We seem to be getting all the blame, anyway, like it was our fault or something. Really! With the grilling they gave me, you'd think I was the leader of an international cocaine cartel or something. Geez, I was just camping out on the river trying to catch a catfish."

He nervously paced the room. It was obvious that he had been through an ordeal.

"He's not exaggerating all that much," Deanna commented. "I think they questioned us so much because we couldn't give them any concrete answers on how we got away. Credit was there, or he wouldn't have gotten shot, and at times we actually thought we saw him. But we also thought we saw you there, too."

Jason nodded his head in agreement. "Teresa says you spent the night with her, but I still think I saw you there with dad. We saw him push you over the cliff, but we never could catch up with either one of you. You weren't even supposed to reach the Big Bend for another week. Why did you come so soon? And how did you find us so quickly?"

Bonnie was stunned by the barrage of questions.

"I don't know what to say," she replied, attempting to sort out the deluge. "Your father dreamed that you had gotten into trouble at Black Dike. And Deanna, too. So we left Arkansas early. At Black Dike he had another dream that told him where you both were being held. But I really can't tell you what happened after he left me with Teresa. You'll have to wait for him to wake up to tell you that."

She hated to be so evasive, but how could she tell them that their rescue had occurred in a dream? Although she had to accept the fact that it happened, in no way did she understand one bit of it. Having no logical explanation, she was not inclined to make a fool of herself.

"Why did we see you there, too?" Deanna pressed.

"Are you sure it was me?" Bonnie stalled. She was really hoping they'd drop the subject.

"There aren't too many redheads in the area, dear. I think you know more about this than you're letting on. What did you tell the DEA?"

"Nobody's ever questioned me."

"Don't you think that's odd?"

Bonnie was becoming flustered. How could she explain?

"I spent the night at Teresa's..."

"We all know that!"

Tension was beginning to fill the room.

"I did what I could to help," she lamely offered.

"The situation called for more than you baring your pretty little buns."

"I don't give a damn what you think," Bonnie countered, her temper beginning to flare.

"The only reason he keeps you around is for sex. Everybody knows that," Deanna snapped.

"That may be how I lured him, but that's not how I keep him." Bonnie smiled.

"He's not taken in by shallow, outward appearances. That's what saved him from you, ya bitch!"

"My, my. I'm surprised that you could put all those words together into one sentence."

Bonnie snapped. "Why don't you go home to your husband where you belong? If it wasn't for you, none of this would have happened in the first place."

Jason and Teresa stepped in between them.

"Little girls, please. This isn't doing any of us any good. Now sit down. Please!"

Teresa commanded.

It was hard to argue with the old woman.

"Now, I don't have all the answers, but I think I can clear up part of what disturbs you. All of you," she emphasized as she paced the room.

"After leaving Bonnie at the spring near my adobe, Credit made his way to the compound where the two of you were being held prisoner." She nodded at Jason and Deanna. "I don't have the details of what happened there, but apparently his plan went awry, if indeed he even had a plan. He, too, was taken captive. He was beaten, taken to the corral, and bound with a rope. I know that for a fact. Around dusk he lost consciousness or fell asleep."

The old woman individually met the gaze of everyone in the room before continuing.

"Now comes the part that takes faith, and an honest evaluation of what each of you witnessed.

"The night before I met Bonnie at the spring, I had a very strange experience. An Indian woman snatched me out of my own disjointed dream and dragged me into hers, or so I thought at the time. She took me to a cottage near a lake and told me that I was about to meet a very special man, and then explained how I might be of assistance to him. I was brought there in order to validate Credit's dreams and alleviate his stumbling block, which was keeping him from helping you. But her plan backfired because he never came to see me while he was awake. However, what the Indian woman did not know was that Bonnie had been given a very special wedding engagement present; the key to entering Credit's dreams. Believe

me when I say this; both Bonnie and Credit were asleep and dreaming when the rescue occurred. It was her presence that enabled the initiative to succeed. My part was merely one of encouragement." She made eye contact with Jason and Deanna.

"I still don't understand how a dream..."

Jason was cut off in mid sentence by the Curandera.

"Think of it as an out of body experience. Your father has learned to project his spiritual aura when dreaming. You were never really sure it was him because he is not yet very good at what he does. And neither is Bonnie. But then, neither are we used to seeing something of that particular nature," she added with a sincere smile.

Jason looked thoughtful. "So when our rescue took place, Bonnie was asleep at your place while dad was tied up in the corral, also asleep?"

Teresa nodded her head in confirmation. "My owl, Lucheza, freed him after you had already escaped the compound."

"How is it all possible?" he asked, still not convinced of anything.

"Your father stumbled, I think that is the right word, into a specialized aspect of sorcery. New avenues have opened up to him. Look at him now. He has even discovered the place of healing. Five days ago he had a gunshot wound in the leg. He had a punctured lung and his body was scarred. Now he is mended! Look at

him! He is healed, and I salute him, for even I thought the place of healing was a myth. These doctors are probably totally confounded by his recovery. Some of them may even turn religious," she added with a grin.

Jason stood uneasily at the side of the bed. "Do you think he's dreaming right now?"

"Most likely," the Curandera said. "His spirit wanders, and so he remains in the coma."

"Can you do anything for him?" Jason asked.

Teresa shook her head. "I can only pray that his friend snatches me once again, and I am put in a position to help."

"Bonnie! Can't you get into his dream again and wake him up?"

"I wish I could," she replied absently. It was a question that had been haunting her for the past five days, the crux of her dilemma. "There was enough powder for only the one time. I was instructed to use it wisely, and I chose to use it the other night to help save y'all."

She wondered if she had taken the root mixture too soon. Would Credit have found a way to pull off the rescue without her? Had she really been needed at that time? Or had she inadvertently sentenced him to spend the rest of his life in a coma?

There was only one thing she knew with any certainty. Now that Credit needed her the most, she was no longer able to help

4 Flipside

As he slipped from one state of awareness into another, the transition felt easy and natural. And yet, at the very moment he crossed the threshold into a new world, his previous world faded into mystery, a slate wiped clean, a dream that he could no longer remember. It made him question whether or not it had even occurred.

He didn't have the slightest inclination about where he had arrived. He was standing on a gently rolling plain that stretched to fairly distant, stark brown,

eroded mountains. They in turn were followed by higher, mist filled ranges, violet in hue. The air was cool and dry.

The plain immediately surrounding him was covered with shards of brown rock in a consistently thin, even layer. Nearby, a shallow, dry arroyo snaked lazily into the broad expanses. It had not seen water in months, perhaps years. There wasn't the first sign of vegetation anywhere along its course. The whole area was nothing but a desolate, forsaken landscape.

As he scanned the mountain flanks for a canyon that might contain water, he unexpectedly spied a group of people not three hundred yards away. Their actions intrigued him, for they appeared to be working the earth.

Surely they didn't intend to farm this arid plateau, he asserted to himself. He was absolutely certain that nothing would grow there.

Intent on resolving the mystery, he began to make his way toward them, only to find himself suddenly sidetracked by the sound of an alluringly beautiful melody. To his surprise and enchantment, he found the source to be a humpbacked flute player; a creature that stood three feet tall on thin, spindly legs. He resembled a giant, blue grasshopper. He had a human face with long antennae protruding from his forehead. He was obviously a master of the flute. The wanderer listened trance-like, captivated by the brilliance.

"That was beautiful," he complimented at the conclusion of the song. "What sort of creature are you?"

"I am a mahu! In my hump I carry seeds; those of maize, beans, melons, and flowers. The music from my flute warms this cool mountain air," the flute player exclaimed with a bubbling smile. His face appeared old and wrinkled, but his voice was a surprisingly youthful falsetto.

"Is that why those people are clearing rocks from the ground? To plant seeds?" the wanderer asked in disbelief. "Nothing will grow here," he added.

The mahu disregarded the skepticism.

"With the magic from my flute we can grow crops in any environment. But that is not our sole purpose. We do not live here, but follow a star. These people are leaving their signature on the ground as proof of their passage. I dare say the markings should last for quite some time in this desert." He flashed a broad grin before continuing. "As you can see, other clans have already preceded us to this place." He held out his arm in a broad sweep across the dead, dusty plain.

The wanderer half-heartedly scanned the featureless grounds before replying. "I see nothing out of the ordinary."

"Perhaps you see nothing because of where you stand," the mahu suggested. "You of all people should know that. You shine brightly with the gift of the Sunfather. If you are not grounded, why limit your perspective?"

The grasshopper put his flute to his lips and the music poured swiftly but gently from the instrument. The wanderer saw the notes as large, rainbow-hued bubbles

that streamed into the sky. When he reached out to touch one, he was lifted firmly from the ground and swept into the air. A ticklish sensation in his stomach caused him to wrap himself around the bubble and hold on tightly.

The note slowly rotated until he found himself staring straight into the bright blue sky. Apprehension gripped him when he realized that he was rapidly approaching a group of intensely brilliant stars or lights. Or something. He wasn't exactly sure what it was he was seeing.

And then an amazing transformation took place in his perception, and he realized that the lights were actually people. Other people were walking the sky with him! Intuitively, he understood that they were the same people who were clearing the rocks from the ground below.

The magic note that he was clinging to rotated once again and his vision became focused on the ground.

His mouth dropped open.

The plain was covered with markings! A multitude of lines ran straight and parallel for miles or criss-crossed in seemingly random patterns. There were geometric figures and animal figures, stylized birds and a whale. The figure presently being formed was that of a flute. He realized that he was on the pampas of Peru. The Plain of Nazca was below him.

The flute playing ceased and the bubble that he clung to could no longer regenerate itself. However, when it burst he did not fall. He analyzed the markings a while longer before floating back to the ground.

Myriad questions numbed his mind as he gazed back into the sky. Again he saw the people as lights. While some of them remained perfectly still, others made varying motions; floating haphazardly, or in broad circles, or swinging as if on a pendulum.

He watched in admiration. "They shine so very brightly. Like stars in the daytime."

A proud glint and a tear of joy lit up the eyes of the grasshopper. "Yes. They use the gift from the Fathersun so very well."

The wanderer understood the allusion well. By separating their awareness from their bodies, these people could utilize their dual nature; the Earth Mother and Sun Father. They needed no fancy gadgets or calculations to create the figures on the plain. They simply directed their actions on the ground from the perspective of above.

"The figures on the ground I understand, no doubt being signatures of the migrating clans. But tell me about the lines. What do they represent?"

"The lines represent many things," the mahu answered. "Some mark the time of our passage, while others time the passage of previous clans. But most of the lines

are a tribute to the Grandmother Spider. It is her web that surrounds the Earth to keep it from separating. Where you find a great many lines intersecting on the plain, that is where the power of the Sunfather is greatest, for that is where the web touches the Earth."

The concept of the web intrigued the wanderer, but before he could formulate another question, they were interrupted by a deep, flapping noise accompanied by a gust of wind.

A large, green parrot touched down beside them.

It was huge! The bird was every bit the size of the grasshopper, but exceedingly more massive and threatening. While the mahu seemed unfazed, the wanderer stared stupidly at the bird.

"I figured we would meet again, white boy!" the parrot cackled. "Yes, it's me. Mochni! Mochni, the parrot. Don't look so surprised. You look stupid enough without your mouth hanging wide open.

"I look much better with a touch of yellow, don't you agree? It makes me feel so much more zestful!" Mochni nodded his head from side to side and did a little dance. His eyes sparkled.

The wanderer didn't give a shit about the yellow feathers. It was the outrageous size of the bird that concerned him. He remembered Mochni as being a larger than normal parrot, but not three feet tall!

"How come you're so much bigger than before?" he finally managed to ask.

"Because I'm younger!" the bird shouted, exceedingly pleased with himself. "I see that you haven't changed at all. You're still as stupid as ever. Have you remembered your name yet?"

"I am a wanderer. I am here to learn."

"Can't remember, huh? Well tell me, mister man of wisdom, from what time period do you hail? How will you ever find your home in order to make use of all this knowledge that you accumulate?"

The wanderer disregarded the questions.

"Why does being younger make you bigger?" he instead asked.

"Hasn't that blue bug taught you anything? I haven't changed! The conditions have. Ask him. Time's been shrinking his appearance for over four thousand years!"

The wanderer was stunned. While he had certainly wondered about the mahu's age, four thousand years seemed like a preposterous assertion. He looked at the old grasshopper.

"Are you actually as old as he says?" he meekly asked.

The mahu had been standing by impassively, apparently uninterested in Mochni, but a smile broke out when he heard the wanderer's question. "I'm not quite as old

as he claims," he snickered. "But close! I am not a man, remember, but a grasshopper with a magical flute." The mahu erupted into full-fledged laughter.

"I apologize for laughing," he said after regaining his composure. "But you look so serious. Mochni and I become smaller as the Age passes. That is the way with ones such as us. We are relics from the Third Age. Our purpose here is to guide.

"Of more immediate concern is why you speak to this foul creature. Especially since you two have already met. My people will not listen to him. Surely..."

"That little band of wanderers!?" Mochni interrupted. "Hah! I spit on them! Most of your urchins have already left you anyway. That's why civilizations arise!"

The mahu ignored the protests of the parrot and looked at the wanderer. "Like myself, Mochni is a spreader of seeds. Only his are the seeds of doubt and confusion, for he is the Deceiver."

"I can't believe you listen to this...this locust!" Mochni screamed, infuriated.

The flute player began to protest, but the parrot cut him off.

"Tell me, locust, do you know where I first met this timewalker? It was in the future at Tenochtitlan! That's right. He was admiring the way Cortes deals with the native people. While you and your puny little clans claim this land by walking the breadth of the continents, north to south and east to west, your friend here knows that it is only wasted effort. It will all come to naught! Absolutely nothing! The white 'gods' will claim ownership of the land by simply planting a flag, and

will then proceed to trample the Earth asunder. Only when there is nothing left will they allow your people their freedom of choice--to either live as white man lives or die!"

He cackled derisively as he turned towards the wanderer. "If you came here to spy on these stupid natives, white man, you would do much better to spend your time at Tiwanaku. There, at least, you can learn what they are capable of accomplishing. You will learn nothing whatsoever by staying with these pathetic rag-a-muffins, these..."

"They are Hopi," the wanderer sternly interjected. "Why don't you just leave?"

"Hopi! That is a good name," the mahu concurred with a thoughtful smile.

"'People of peace'. That is a fine title for those who heed the word of the Creator. We really must talk further, my friend."

"We could if this parrot would quit squawking in our ear," the wanderer replied.

Without further ado, the mahu purposefully raised the flute to his lips. Sparkling, opaque notes soon gathered thickly and furiously around the parrot.

Mochni's eyes shone with terror. "I blame you for this, timewalker! I'll get you for this!" he shouted. "That bug won't always be around to protect you." He was then lifted forcefully from the ground and whisked away by the notes. Within seconds he had receded from sight.

"Well, that's certainly one good way to get rid of the jackass," the wanderer applauded.

"He is rather appalling, isn't he? There simply is no debating that devil, for his words are tainted with poison."

The wanderer dropped to the ground, suddenly subdued and exhausted.

"I'm sorry," he moaned. "But that parrot drains me. He leaves me twisted and frustrated. He attacks my identity, calls me white man, and makes me feel worthless."

"Mochni is like that. He brings out the worst in you. He plays upon your aspirations, your fears and your insecurities, and tries to plant you with the seeds of confusion. But I really must say, your race is a silly thing to worry about. All men are the same. They have life to live, decisions to make. It is not always an easy path.

"About your identity, I cannot help you. Is it true that you are lost in time?"

"I don't know who I am or where I belong," the wanderer solemnly admitted.

"Perhaps I've always been wandering. I remember certain historical events, so I must come from the future, but I have no personal memories."

"None at all?" the flute player inquired.

"No. I remember only my previous meeting with Mochni and a visit to Oraibi, where your people end their migrations." And in a pretty pathetic state, too, he added to himself. The thought did nothing to improve his mood.

"Well, you are welcome to stay with us for as long as you'd like. You look tired. Perhaps you'd care to rest?"

"Perhaps it would do me good."

"I will play my flute."

The mahu sat down on the ground and proceeded to play a soft, enchanting lullaby that induced heavy drowsiness in the wanderer. He slumped back to find a more comfortable position as a purple mist billowed up around him. In an instant he was gone.

The mahu continued to play his flute.

5 Sierra Chino

A thousand chirping crickets helped to usher out the fading twilight to gradually reveal a dazzling nighttime sky.

"Did you say you spoke with your husband today?" Teresa asked as she settled back in her chair to study the dotted patterns.

"Yes. I told him I'd be coming home at the end of the week."

"Are you sure that is what you want to do?"

"I think it's the right thing to do."

"He's a very understanding man. He must love you very much."

"I'm very lucky," she admitted. "We've always had our share of problems, but I'd never left him like this before."

"I'm surprised he has not come for you."

"He threatened to! But he agreed to give me a few more days."

"Perhaps he should come out here. You ran away from materialism once, what's to say that you won't do so again? Your condition has not changed all that much."

"You keep saying that, but you offer no explanation."

"This is nothing more than a mask," Teresa said as she outlined Deanna's entire body with a point of her finger. "It is a mask for the spirit, a spirit that can be seen as an aura of luminosity. Illness shows up as a dark splotch or a tear in that luminosity. My talent is to prescribe medicine to cure the spirit, which in turn heals the body. Your luminosity is a dull glow. There are no tears or splotches. It is up to you alone to restore your luster. You shine more brightly when you help me gather medicinal herbs, but your luster fades again when you return to your brooding moods."

"And Credit?"

The Curandera shifted her chair to give her a different perspective of the sky.

"Credit's spirit is gone. His life force remains to keep his body alive, but his spirit is missing."

"Are you sure there is nothing you can do for him?"

"No. His condition has not changed. I talked with Bonnie today. As strong as she is, the poor girl doesn't sound well at all. She finally convinced Jason that there was nothing he could do and that it was best that he get on with his life, so he left for school two days ago, but I'm afraid the strain is getting to be too much for her."

Deanna shuffled uneasily. "I'd like to be there, but I don't think it would do much good. Especially after the scene I caused. I've really made a mess of things."

The Curandera repositioned herself once more. "Indian lore tells of seven worlds that a person can maintain, that equate to the seven stages of mankind. Perhaps Credit travels to one of those worlds, or even to all of them."

"Jeez," Deanna muttered. "I can't even remember if I dream at night, much less travel to other worlds."

"I know what you mean. It takes strict discipline and ritual."

"Ritual! That's something Credit never heard of!"

"Yes, he is unconventional, isn't he?" Teresa commented. But her own ritual of staring at the stars night after night had given her reason to believe that she was

on the right path. Last night she had discovered herself in the chaparral memorizing details of the constellations, when she suddenly realized that the patterns were all wrong. Something inside her then registered the deception, and she knew that she was dreaming. Still, her overriding concern in her dream remained with her. She had entered the chaparral at night, something she very seldom did, and she was well aware that without proper guidance from the stars, she was lost. She became overly agitated and immediately woke.

Although proud of what she had accomplished, she understood that the task was more complicated than she had first envisioned. While her ritual could take her to the point of realization, she knew that the key was to maintain the continuity of the sequences once she was there. But even if she could accomplish that, she knew it was still a million to one shot that she could ever locate Credit. It would be hard enough in one world, let alone in seven.

"I envy Bonnie," Deanna said, shattering the silence.

"As do I. In a lot of ways you and I are very much alike. We sense that there is more to life, but don't know how to get there. Bonnie has caught the flow and takes things in stride. Because she expects nothing, everything is a blessing. Personally, I envy her because she had the root powder to take her directly to Credit."

But she also had much more than that, Teresa thought to herself. The falling star that night had been an omen, confirmation that Bonnie's direction and the

direction of the Earth were one and the same. Timing was everything. There was no way she could have failed with a sign like that.

Tired and disheartened at finding no omen for herself, Teresa stood up and said her good-nights.

Deanna envied Bonnie for a much different reason; for the way she stood by her man. And for having a man like Credit to stand beside.

She peered across the yard at the dark shadows of the chaparral. She was going to miss Teresa. She had enjoyed being with her, whether they were visiting patients or gathering herbs and roots out in the desert. She especially looked forward to their conversations each night. But she was also growing bored with the primitive lifestyle.

It would feel good to get back to Mark. And back to modern conveniences.

Running hot water, for one. She would be a good wife, and not cause any more trouble for her husband.

A dark shadow swept across the ground in front of her and Deanna glanced up at the heavens. There wasn't a star to be seen! She was baffled. Only a moment ago the sky was on fire with them.

She stepped into the yard for a broader view. The entire sky had clouded over without a trace of the wind! How bizarre and ominous, she thought.

She would be sure to mention the episode in the morning. Perhaps Teresa would have a logical explanation for such a curious phenomenon.

6 Flipside

"Look! The mist."

"I see him!"

"He's opaque."

"He's returning!"

"...materializing."

"He's coming back to us!"

The mist dissipated the moment he opened his eyes, and he saw that the excited voices belonged to a throng of people that had gathered around. The mahu sat directly across from him, a weak smile upon his face. His flute rested across his lap.

"It's sprinkling," the wanderer stammered.

"Yes!"

"Does it rain here very often?"

"It's highly unusual," the grasshopper assured with a smile.

The wanderer rubbed his eyes. "It's a wonder I came back here and not to another time slot."

"I continued to play my song, even after you summoned the purple mist," the flute player explained. "I watched as it took you away. I surmised that if you had a beacon to focus on, you might have a chance to return. And it worked! My magic notes followed you, and you followed them back to the pampas."

The wanderer maintained his silence.

"Do you remember where you went?" the mahu asked.

"I'm not sure."

Although memories were beginning to crystallize, it was still a struggle to keep his thoughts from drifting. The crowd leaned forward, eagerly awaiting his word. Hesitantly, he began to relate the few details that he could easily recall.

He described a vast, absolutely flat plain, cream colored under a steel gray sky. Three colossal pyramids hovered stationary above the landscape. His desire had been to move closer in order to learn the reason why they were suspended in the air, but he had been unable to traverse the huge crevice in the plain; an enticing, black chasm that soaked up all light. He had the oddest sensation that he had been within that crevice before, yet he could not recall any of the details.

Eventually, he lost interest in the pyramids and instead became intrigued by the translucent bubbles that came out of nowhere and yet seemed to be everywhere. They were massive enough that he had considered using them to transport his body across the chasm, but he was afraid they wouldn't be able to support his weight. He finally came to associate the bubbles with the incessant music that he had been hearing. Only then did he sense that there was a two-way stream from a mother source. As he latched onto one of the bubbles, he glanced back at the plain across the chasm and thought he saw a figure running towards him, beckoning him from the distance. The figure gave him an ominous feeling. But then he was gone from that world. He had returned to the pampas.

"It was all so real. Was it all in my imagination?" he quietly asked.

"Was the chasm black or blue?" the mahu inquired.

"It was a deeply rich blue, very enticing in some respects, horrifying in others."

"Now I understand why you have trouble recalling where you belong, why you have that gap in your memory. You have perfectly described the Plains of Metamor. Within that crevice waits a personal journey, unique to each individual. In most cases, it takes years of preparation before one feels capable of challenging the chasm. It can be a very dangerous journey, and you were gone a long time. I hope you know what you are doing."

Inwardly, the wanderer admitted to himself that he didn't have the slightest clue as to what he was doing, but he also had a feeling that he was on the verge of remembering something important. Was it about the person who had beckoned him?

"The purple mist is the gateway to the seven worlds," the flute player pronounced.

Of course! The purple mist.

"Of the seven worlds, the Third and the Fifth are much like this Fourth World, and are easy to maintain and relate to. The other four become increasingly alien. All of them are unique. Metamor is the last world, and as its name implies, it is a transition. A metamorphosis. Or perhaps the end."

The wanderer continued to draw a blank.

"The tendency for most men is to hover, almost stationary, in the purple mist, only briefly touching on the other worlds in their dreams," the mahu continued.

"Needless to say, you enter the Blue World. But upon leaving there, something makes you trip, and you end up catching only the fringes of the white light. You end up dancing through time with no control."

Memories inundated the timewalker. Of course! It was all so simple! When he was in the purple mist, the Earth was the white light. If he would enter the very center, the most intense portion of the glow, he would find his own time period. He would find his home!

He felt that he was about to experience further revelations when the spell was broken by the mahu's voice.

"I know that you are probably eager to test the mist again, but since you are here now, won't you please spend the day with us? I, for one, would be delighted." His enormous grin was accented by the flowing wrinkles upon his face.

The wanderer was touched. The mahu had immeasurably helped him. He had offered his friendship and had shown him the way to return home. Of course he would stay the day.

"You've got yourself a deal," he said as he grasped the flute player's hand.

Whatever the mahu was, he was surely a fine old soul.

The wanderer stood and stretched. Several people in the crowd, up until then attentive and polite, suddenly closed in on him, attempting to touch his body. He felt a moment of apprehension.

"They want to feel your clothes," the grasshopper explained. "What can I say? They are like that. They know that you come from the future and they are curious."

Blue jeans and a sweatshirt, he reflected. Big deal. But he was also certain that no one intended him any harm, and he felt silly about his nervous reaction.

The mahu chuckled. "You really need to lighten up, you know? I haven't seen you truly smile since you've been here." He gave a friendly wink. "Think about it. Here you are talking to a grasshopper, an unusually tall one at that, and you're all frowns. And a couple of days ago, there was a mammoth parrot. You know?" The flute player nudged him good-naturedly in the knee. "Smile! Laugh! You put too much pressure on yourself."

"I try to take things in stride," the timewalker moped. A couple days ago? Had he spent that much time in the Blue World? What in the world had he done while he was there?

The mahu smiled at him with fatherly admiration. "Do you still wish to visit Tiwanaku?"

A broad smile crossed the timewalker's face. Ancient even to the Incas, Tiwanaku was a mystical lure that he could not refuse. His excitement began to mount.

"Of course," he managed to stutter. "I'd love to go there."

But immediately he reverted to form and began to fret. He knew that the city was several hundred miles from the Plain of Nazca, high up in the Andes Mountains near Lake Titicaca. Exceedingly rough terrain separated them, and his enthusiasm began to dull as he anticipated several weeks journey.

The mahu noticed his dismay but merely grinned.

"Ready?" he asked as he raised the flute to his lips.

Before he could respond, the timewalker was engulfed by the music and carried away, swift but light as the breeze. The next moment he found himself in a narrow alleyway in a residential section of Tiwanaku. He was following the mahu towards a wider, sunlit avenue that led through a busy marketplace.

They passed by stalls of ducks and geese and booths full of fresh vegetables and fish. The wanderer noticed that they were beginning to attract considerable attention as a ripple of confusion swept through the stalls. While some of the people were respectful and reverent of the mahu, and understandably curious about himself, he couldn't shake the impression that most of the Tiwanakans couldn't see either one of them.

Even so, they had gathered quite a following by the time they reached the outskirts of the ceremonial center. The mahu paused there to let the magnitude of the city sink in. And the wanderer ravenously took it in.

Across the moat the ceremonial center was filled with massive platforms that were topped with elaborate buildings and temples. Some of the structures utilized fifty-ton blocks of stone in a precise and vital architectural style. Inside one open temple stood a carved stone monolith of a priest or deity, one of the two structures that he recognized. The other was the Gate of the Sun, part of a larger temple complex that stood behind them. Although smaller than the city of Tenochtitlan, Tiwanaku was on a grander, more dynamic scale.

"The temple complex within the moat and the one behind us are ancient," the mahu announced. "They are already centuries old. Compare them to the more recent temples at the far end of the court, and you can see that the civilization is in decline."

"And why is that?"

"The beginning stages of any civilization bring fresh, diverse ideas, and for a time great deeds can be accomplished. But the survival and prosperity of society requires specialization; food production, masonry, crafts, government. Laws are enacted and the rules are expected to be obeyed. Children are taught to conform. As society becomes more structured, laws become more inclusive. And when individual perception and perspective are tuned to a narrow band to fit the rules, creativity begins to erode and abilities to decline.

"The early leadership of Tiwanaku learned that ritual could focus attention, and so for a time they were able to maintain momentum. The masses were misled into

believing that they kept the true faith, when in reality their thoughts were tuned to the building of the city and maintenance of the culture. Instead of the Creator, they worship a monument to themselves."

"What about a democratic society?"

"A what?"

"A free society."

"No rules and regulations?"

"Well..."

"It is a contradiction of terms. One can be responsible to society, or one can be responsible to freedom, but you can't have it both ways.

"The Creator has given to each of us the gift of unlimited perspective. True freedom. It is up to us to balance and maintain the entire gift by utilizing each side of awareness, the Sunfather as well as the Earthmother. Many people here cannot see us now because they have not polished their link to the Sunfather, and that is sad. What is sadder is that they have forgotten that there is even a link to polish."

"But the monolith in the temple depicts a priest holding pahos, male and female. Surely they keep open their door to the Creator," the wanderer protested.

"If they walked with the Creator, there would be no need for idols, no need for pretensions. Listen to me!" the mahu suddenly exclaimed. "I'm beginning to sound like you. So serious!

"But I believe that I have answered the questions that Mochni raised. Your concern the other day was not so much about being a white man as it was about being a traitor and breaking from your cultural roots."

"How do you know I have broken from my culture?"

"You would not be here otherwise. Let's say that it is a prerequisite for what you do, although it intrigues me that you choose to visit the high cultures. Be careful that you do not escape the clutches of one civilization, only to be trapped by another. Remember, only freedom can lead you to the mysteries that you need to uncover.

"Come now," he jovially prodded. "I will show you my favorite place in this city."

They made their way across the moat and into the tangled web of the temple complex. The soldiers and priests at the gates let them pass unmolested, as if they feared or were in awe of the mahu, but they kept the following masses out. Many of the walls that they passed were covered in murals, but the wanderer was able to catch only a casual glimpse of the imagery for fear of losing sight of the fast moving grasshopper.

They finally came to rest inside the sunken court, another part of Tiwanaku that would survive the years. The forty by fifty-foot court was eight foot deep, comprised of blocks of stone that weighed from five to fifty tons each. At least sixty human faces carved out of stone protruded from the walls. Painted in natural pigments, they were completely life-like and represented people from around the globe, from Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, and America. The craftsmanship was superb, and with very little effort, the wanderer could imagine the faces imbued with the life force, staring thoughtfully and serenely back at him.

"Every continent on the face of the Earth is represented here," the wanderer mumbled in amazement, echoing an age-old riddle. "How is that possible?"

"During the beginning stages of the city, the people had not yet strayed so far from the Sunfather. There were still many who possessed the ability to see the lines of the Grandmother Spider. A few of those people knew how to grasp those lines. The strands carried them across the sea or to wherever they wished to go. When they returned, they carved the likeness of those they met on their journeys. The murals on the walls we passed depict some of their stories. There haven't been any new faces now for several hundred years because the present people can no longer isolate the lines of the Spider."

The mahu stared at the wanderer with admiration.

"You, on the other hand, give me hope for the future, for you utilize your dual aspects. You are able to see my people as they are, spirit fire from the Sun, as well

as their Earthly, bodily aspect. You walk the sky and have the ability to see Mochni and myself. It is people like you who give us stature. The fewer people there are who are capable of seeing us, the smaller we become. We are truly in the eye of the beholder."

"Back on the pampas I saw your people as stars..."

"Which they truly are. The spirit fire."

"...but I didn't see the lines of the web."

"For the same reason that many Tiwanakans don't see us now; your attention was turned elsewhere. The lines are there."

"Do they touch the Earth anywhere near here? Can you show them to me?"

The mahu suppressed a sigh. "Follow me."

They departed the city and then followed a lightly worn footpath across the rust colored hills of the Altiplano, and for the first time the wanderer became aware of the extreme altitude. He was having difficulty catching his breath in the cold, thin air and it was beginning to make him feel weak and sluggish. He stumbled along as if he was drunk, while the mahu effortlessly skipped along in front of him, which made his mood even more ill mannered.

"Is this the place?" he irritably asked when they finally came to a halt.

"This is it! We are in the center of the intersecting lines."

Although the wanderer could discern no difference in that spot from the rest of the vast plain, he had to admit that he no longer felt sluggish. In fact, he felt just the opposite; energetic and powerful.

"I want to convey my good wishes, for I believe this is the moment of our parting," the mahu solemnly announced as he held out his hand. "I am happy to have met a man from the future. You have done my heart much good."

The wanderer was shocked and confused by the pronouncement and was reluctant to take the flue players hand. He had grown very fond of the hunchbacked grasshopper, had come to think of him as being a friend and mentor, and he had no intention of leaving him now.

"I know your curiosity. You will grab hold of one of the lines and then you'll be gone. You would not otherwise be satisfied," the mahu explained. "And once you leave, you will not return."

"I'll be back! The other people returned to carve the faces. I'll return."

The mahu shook his head sadly. "No. You will get lost. You will not return."

"You can play your flute and I'll follow your music back," the wanderer persisted.

Why not? It had worked before.

"I'm sorry, but in this instance I'm afraid my song will be needed for other purposes."

Other purposes? In a bad mood to begin with, the wanderer became extremely exasperated. He sat down on the ground in a snit. Hell, he didn't see any damn lines to begin with!

"My music will be needed to show you the lines," the grasshopper explained, obviously amused by the timewalkers stubbornness. He sat down on the ground and readied his flute.

"It has certainly been a pleasure. If ever you find yourself in a quandary, facing impossible odds, think of me. Perhaps it will help you gain a new perspective. I wish you well on the quest, timewalker, whether that quest is for knowledge or for your home."

He started to put the flute to his mouth, but then reconsidered.

"Uh, one more thing," he said. "Lighten up, huh?"

And then he grinned that huge, wrinkled grin before becoming one with his magical instrument.

As the melody gathered in volume and richness the wanderer witnessed the world begin to change. The physical features of the land and air dissolved, becoming a translucent superimposition over the true source, the life force, the fire from the Sun.

The wanderer saw that he was surrounded by energy and it overwhelmed him. Everything glowed. Every rock, every shrub, every particle of dirt was alive with

energy. No single part of the Earth was dead! Everything pulsed with the life force and was connected to everything else by filaments of light that resembled strings. It was true! He marveled. The web of life was no metaphor.

He looked up and saw hundreds of fine, gossamer lines of a different texture criss-crossing the sky. Many of them converged above him and dropped to the ground on the very spot where he was sitting. Reaching out his hand, he grasped a particularly appealing strand and was immediately pulled from the ground and whisked away! The anticipated ticklish sensation was short-lived, quickly replaced by an oppressive, inescapable feeling of enormous pressure. Unnatural and stifling as it was, he nevertheless knew that it corresponded to his traveling the lines at a fantastic rate of speed, and it was up to him to persevere.

At the precise moment that the pressure became unbearable, he found himself bodily on the ground once again. No longer was he in the Andes, but instead was standing in amber sand on the top edge of a desert plateau. A broad river flowed below in the near distance, its flood plain green and lush and cut with canals. The air was hot and heavy.

When he glanced around he was shocked and confused by what he saw. On the horizon stood three giant pyramids, and he wondered if the lines had taken him to the Blue World.

No!

He realized right away. Nestled unmistakably between the pyramids sat the Sphinx. He was in Egypt!

Overwhelming exhilaration led to a flustered, disoriented feeling. His knees became weak. He yearned for water. He yearned for the purple mist.

Before he could slump to the ground in exhaustion, the mist came and snatched him away.

7 Teresa/Flipside

She leaned against the wall and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Her search for medicinal roots and plants often took her away from her home, but rarely did she wander so far during the heat of the day. She must have become severely lost in thought, although she couldn't for the life of her remember what she might have been contemplating.

Stepping away from the shade, she gazed the length of the Sierra Ponce. Thank God for the mesa, she thought, or she really would be lost. As it was, she knew

that all she had to do was walk away from the escarpment and she would soon spot a familiar setting.

Feeling reassured and rested, she chose the path that led through a thick stand of river cane. The trail dropped gradually until she found herself ankle deep in clear, flowing water.

It threw her thoughts into a frenzy. She had been certain that she knew every viable spring in the area. Why didn't she know about this one?!

She scooped a handful of water. Cool and sweet. It was an excellent source, easily flowing thousands of gallons daily.

Determined to seek answers, she continued along the path. At the edge of the cane patch she came upon a small clearing in which stood a small, white frame hut. A sign above the door read, "Rare Plant Emporium."

Her thoughts flipped again, spilling into turmoil.

Never before had she heard of such a place! It was so far off the beaten path that it couldn't possibly be a tourist trap. But since she didn't have the faintest idea about where she was, she decided to go inside to inquire.

Before she could enter the shack, the door opened from the inside and a handsome, silver-haired gentleman greeted her.

"Please, please, come in! You must have a seat and we will get you some refreshment. Ramon! Please, get the young lady some tea!"

Gently, but somewhat eagerly, the man ushered her to one of several tables inside the dark room.

"It is so very hot outside today; it will do you good to get out of the sun for a spell. And Ramon makes an excellent, excellent cup of tea."

Another elderly man stepped from the shadows to hold her chair.

"My name is Raphael, señorita." He tipped his head and winked. "I am very proud to be at your service."

"Ramon! Hurry up!" the first man interrupted. "Don't keep the lovely señorita waiting!"

"Rueben! Where are your manners?" Raphael whispered, obviously annoyed by his friends' rude behavior.

"What do you mean? I am only trying to assist the young lady."

"You're too anxious! Don't be so pushy."

"How can you make such accusations?"

"Let the lovely lady relax."

Teresa sat down and gazed about the room. Although steeped in shadow, it seemed much larger than she supposed it would be.

Ramon was suddenly standing before her with the tea, ogling her like a love struck teen-ager.

"Thank-you, Ramon." She graciously accepted the refreshment.

"I'm sorry that I kept you waiting," he stuttered. "But I had no idea you were so young and beautiful."

She blushed. She hadn't experienced anything like this in years. All three of the old men were fawning over her, strutting like peacocks, trying so hard to impress her. They actually called her young! Didn't they know that she must have had at least twenty years on all of them?

"Rueben, the big buffoon, hasn't even introduced himself to the lovely lady," Raphael complained to Ramon.

Rueben finally swallowed his pride and composed himself.

"I am very sorry, señorita. Please accept my apologies. Me llamo es Rueben," he said as he stood at attention. "Y Ramon and Raphael. Welcome to the Emporium. We don't get many visitors anymore. Especially a fine young woman like yourself."

"Nobody comes here anymore," Ramon dejectedly stated.

"That's not true!" Raphael sharply exclaimed. "Why, just recently that young American man came to see us."

"But before him there was nobody for a long, long time."

"He was a funny man, wasn't he? But I liked him."

"He was quiet."

"He didn't ask many questions, did he? Most people who come here can't stop with the questions."

"Most people don't come here anymore."

"Only the American."

"And that little boy who keeps creeping around."

"He can't quite find the place, though. Can he?"

"Creepy."

"But the American knew where he was going."

"He sure took the long way, though. Didn't he?"

Teresa's thoughts had wandered from the conversation. It took her a moment before she realized that they had stopped talking and were staring kindly at her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"We call this place Qattarah," Rueben replied.

"Where all things are known," Ramon added.

Where all things are known, repeated the Curandera to herself. These silly old men! Were they actually serious or just pulling her leg? Were they stately old gentlemen, or three crazy old farts? Very likely, even they didn't know where they were. Qattarah was such a cliché.

"You can ask a question if you'd like."

"Yes, please. Ask us anything."

"Anything at all."

Amused, she decided to play their game. Immediately, she began to inventory possible questions. Why was the room larger on the inside than on the outside? If this was the Rare Plant Emporium, where was the flora? There wasn't a single plant in sight.

She thought further. There had to be a better question to test them with. Where was the room of healing, and how could she find it? Or something else?

It dawned on her.

"If you know all things," she said, "then tell me, where is Credit?"

She immediately feared that she shouldn't have asked. They'd never be able to answer. Their charade would be exposed, their fun ruined.

"We'll do better than that! We'll show you!"

No! She was shocked. Certainly they were bluffing.

"But I didn't even tell you his last name!"

"Doesn't matter. He's the young American who was recently here."

"He's been jumping through time."

"But now he's back."

"For the moment, anyway."

"An evil force strives to keep him from waking."

"If it succeeds, it could usher in a dark, new Age. It could keep the new light from dawning."

"Perhaps you could be of help."

"We can show you where he's at, señorita."

"But we must hurry. There isn't much time."

"Antonio!" Rueben rudely hollered.

An intimidating young man carrying an automatic rifle with bullets strapped across his chest stepped into the room, and the four men forcefully ushered Teresa out the back door.

It happened so fast that she had no time to react. She started to become panic stricken when they dragged her to the well and stood her on top of the stone retaining wall. The water inside the well bore a perfect reflection of the cloudless blue sky, minus the reflection of the roof. Her nerves began to fray even further when the water would not return her own reflection.

Ramon and Antonio kept a firm grip on either side of her. Rueben and Raphael stood close behind.

"Lucheza is calling you," Rueben whispered.

Lucheza?

"He will be your guide."

"He will take you to Credit," Raphael added.

"He is your soul mate."

"You can trust him."

"He knows the way."

"But the journey is not without danger."

"Risk makes the rewards more precious."

"Take the mist to the white light."

"You must go back through the mist without waking up."

"Whatever you do..."

"...don't wake up."

Don't wake up? She suddenly realized that this was all a dream!

"Lucheza waits for you."

Before she could respond, they picked her up and dropped her into the well. But instead of falling to a watery death, the mist gathered her in. She was drawn to the white light and then found herself in the body of an owl. She was flying with her soul mate, Lucheza! She felt strong and powerful as she rode the wind currents, driven but free, confident that Lucheza would lead her to Credit Lews.

It seemed like hours before they began their descent. Anticipation mounted when she sensed that Credit was nearby, but her elation was rudely interrupted when a severe, sudden jolt shot through her body in agonizing ripples. She had been attacked! Wounded by the unseen foe, she began to plummet towards the ground.

Lucheza darted after the predator in a flash, and after a lengthy chase he caught up to a bright green parrot, no larger than a bumblebee, but uncannily swift and powerful. A vicious struggle followed before the vengeful owl trapped the

squirming menace in his deadly claws. Mysteriously, the parrot melted into nothing.

Hopelessly injured, Teresa struggled valiantly to hold onto consciousness as she fluttered towards the restored ruins of an ancient civilization.

8 Flipside

He was standing halfway up the Pyramid of the Moon, gazing down the Pathway of the Dead, Teotihuacan, Valley of Mexico. The location was unmistakable. The scene was exactly as he had seen it in archaeological textbooks. One of the largest pyramids in the world, the Pyramid of the Sun dominated the view to the east of the avenue. Further south was the Temple of Quetzalcoatl.

Only a moment ago he was standing in the unfathomable reaches of Metamor, ricocheting through the catacombs like a pinball, intent on reaching the center.

The very next moment he was back in the Valley of Mexico. He had entirely missed the purple mist.

Ruefully, he concluded that the mahu had been right. Something was making him trip, and then he caught only the fringes of the white light. Once again he had missed his mark. He continued to dance through time. Once again he had come to visit a high culture of the past.

He sat down on the edge of the tiered pyramid and dangled his feet in the air. Late afternoon shadows from the temples lining the two mile long boulevard gave the Pathway a ladder-like appearance, creating an optical illusion that suggested he could climb the rungs of the shadow ladder to reach the tops of the far distant mountains. And while his logic told him that it was a ridiculous assertion, his instinct maintained that it was indeed within the realm of human possibility.

The air was perfectly still around him. In fact, there wasn't any kind of movement anywhere, and he realized that he was alone in the city. There wasn't a soul to be seen.

He quickly reviewed the mysteries of Teotihuacan, how an unknown people took a civilization to illustrious heights but then came to an abrupt ending for no apparent reason. Over a hundred years elapsed before the Toltecs moved into the Valley, migrants who may have briefly inhabited the city before rising to prominence at their own capital of Tula. He thus assumed his current time frame to be circa 800 AD, sometime before the arrival of the Toltecs.

A whirlwind picked up a cloud of dust in the plaza below. He watched as the twister investigated every corner of the square as if it had a will of its own, and then danced away towards the Temple of Tepantitla. He knew that in spite of the fact that there were no large public ball courts in Teotihuacan, Tepantitla housed a fine collection of murals depicting the ball game.

The sun had set and the afternoon twilight was slipping into dusk. He decided that if he hurried, he may still have time to view the murals before total darkness set in. He thought he may even find clues pertaining to the desertion of the city.

As he looked for a route to the plaza below, he noted two large birds pass by in flight. One of them appeared to be injured. It fluttered badly and was having trouble staying aloft. He watched as it disappeared into one of the temples surrounding the square.

Without further hesitation, he jumped from the pyramid in a long, arching parabola. He knew it had been a mistake the moment he hit the air, since he was more than fifty feet above the ground. He prepared himself to roll in order to soften the blow, but he landed light as a feather. A puff of dust arose from his feet where he touched down.

His initial intent was to follow the twister to view the murals, but one of the large birds returned menacingly, swooping low and coming frightfully close as it passed. It made a quick turn and then made another quick pass. As he dodged alertly out of the way, he noted that his attacker was an owl.

Or was he mistaken? He began to worry. Could that have been Mochni instead of an owl? He wouldn't put it past the creepy parrot. Although he'd never expect to find the mahu at Teotihuacan, Mochni could show up anywhere. After all, he had promised to get revenge.

He watched with alarm as the bird made another turn. But instead of rushing at him like before, the bird slowed its velocity. It swooped in low and landed next to him. Wary of its presence, the timewalker studied the creature apprehensively. There was no doubt that it was an owl; an alarmingly familiar owl who returned his gaze with deep, intelligent eyes. He felt compelled to follow the bird when it spread its wings and flew towards a temple complex a hundred feet away.

Although it was incredibly dark inside the temple, the wanderer could see with absolute clarity. The injured owl was lying on the floor against the far wall. From its labored breathing, he could tell that it was struggling to maintain life.

Although he wanted to act, he moved slowly across the floor, his eyes pinned to the pulsing bird, saddened by the fact that he was powerless to help. If only the mahu had been there to advise him, he thought as he pictured the grinning old grasshopper in his mind, he might be able to do something.

Suddenly, he could see the life force within the owl as its body became nothing more than a translucent haze around a central core of fire, in this case a dim, flickering glow that was being consumed by a pressing patch of void. There was

no other way he could describe the predator, for what was attacking the owl had no substance. It was a distortion in the air. It was nothing.

Equating the bird with life and the void with death, he found himself spellbound by the struggle.

It did not last long. The owl gathered together its last remaining resources and then flared up brilliantly, causing both the wanderer and the void to leap back cautiously. For a brief moment, the timewalker saw a little old lady standing in front of him, imploring him to return home. The next moment she was gone, having eluded the persistent patch of void by merging miraculously with the wall, transforming herself into a mural of an incredibly realistic looking owl.

Overloaded by events, the wanderer glanced numbly around the room. The void was still present, writhing spasmodically towards him, while the other owl stood frozen in the doorway. Disgusted by his inability to help in any way, he passed by the rigid bird, stepped outside, and then climbed the platform in the middle of the plaza to ponder the implications of what he had just witnessed.

He realized that he had recognized the image of the woman who had briefly confronted him. It was the curandera, Teresa. It was her owl, Lucheza, who now stood motionless in the entranceway to the temple.

But how could that be? He wondered. Could they, too, walk through time? Even the owl? Or was it all an illusion? What really happened inside the temple?

Unable to rationalize events, he decided to return to the room. But before he could jump from the platform, he noticed street lights on the outskirts of the ruins, and then the tail lamps of an automobile in the distance. He froze.

Damn! He railed. He was at Teotihuacan all right, but at the archaeological site! He had returned to his own time period after all. His name was Credit Lews and Teresa had come to lead him home to Bonnie.

He jumped jubilantly from the platform and darted back into the Temple of Quetzalpapatl. He passed straight through the mysterious, lingering patch of void.

“Yech!” he shouted and tossed his arms into the air. He involuntarily turned and grasped and picked at his skin. It was as if he had just run through a giant, sticky cobweb. He could find no strands of web, but the icky feeling had quickly turned into a body-wide burning sensation, and he began to rub his skin furiously.

When he turned towards the wall once again, he ran straight into the purple mist.

9 Teresa/Flipside

She had not been given instructions about what to do in such a contingency. She knew only that if she attempted to wake, the void would follow her, the life force would be squeezed from her body, and her days on Earth would be over.

She had to make a decision, and she had no time to squander.

Seeing no other alternative to eluding the ghost of death, she fused herself with the solid rock wall behind her, fully expecting to enter into a peaceful state of bliss in suspended animation, an eternal state of limbo not unlike death. And even

though there would be no escape, she knew that if the ghost happened to follow, then it, too, would be forever trapped in eternity. She could at least hope for a partial victory.

Instead, she found herself alone in a swirling field of energy, but with her thought processes functioning normally. She was no longer a physical being, had no eyes with which to see. But she could detect that there were different colored segments in the purple tinged field that pulled at her deepest feelings, competing forcefully for her attention, keeping her in a quixotic state of confusion.

As she desperately attempted to sort through her options, a swirling vortex of incredible warmth suddenly appeared and passed her by.

Obediently, she followed it into the Blue.

10 Flipside

He awoke fresh and rested, eager to continue the relentless pursuit of his singular goal; to reach the core, the center. Only there, at that sacred place, would the mysteries of creation be revealed. Only there would his purpose for existence be fulfilled.

And he was so close; so imminently close.

Brimming with confidence, he enthusiastically set his course and once again began his ricocheting journey through the winding tunnels. While others of his

kind bounced around aimlessly without a clue, he had discovered the vital secret; the way to avoid retrogression.

A searing ball of energy appeared in front of him. Instead of making the common mistake of shifting his mass in order to avoid the collision, he willfully met the bolt head on, purposefully seeking out the impact. Instead of a brutal jolt resulting in retrogression, he merged with the blazing energy, letting the fire fuel him, exponentially increasing his own speed and endurance.

He consumed two more bolts in rapid succession and then shot swiftly into the center of Metamor, ablaze with self-esteem, gloatingly aware that only the most gifted and cleverest of their kind ever made it that far. God, he was good! With a flourish he set aside the goals of seeking knowledge and understanding. Instead, he opted to bask in the glory and adulation heaped upon him by others of his own worth. He was feverishly eager to join in their orgiastic state of self-indulgence. Learning the Mysteries would have to wait.

And it felt so good. But before he could receive all of the honors and proper blandishments due to a creature of his ilk, the conditions around him unexpectedly changed. He suddenly found himself on the threshold of an all-inclusive void, moving forward with no hope of being able to stop or change direction. With no control over the situation, he lapsed into a peaceful, soul-searching state of bliss.

And then he was gone.

11 Bonnie/Flipside

She was intuitively aware that the end was near, and it brought a piercing sense of relief. She had grown to despise the loathsome nature of her condition as well as her repugnant surroundings, the cold, antiseptic tunnels. Much too weak to fight the onerous force that controlled her every action, she had long ago resigned herself to accepting the fate that lay in store. Now she even looked forward to it.

But as fate would have it, a sizzling bolt of energy shot from an unsuspected cranny. It sent her hurtling backwards out of control. She ricocheted off the walls

in accelerating retrogression, creating unavoidable chaos as she collided with others of her own kind, sending them, too, into uncontrollable disarray.

Although she had experienced retrogression many times, she soon discovered that this time was much different. This time she was not being slowed by the constant pull from the center, but was instead catapulting through the corridors with increasing velocity, moving rapidly outward until she shot gloriously from the constraining tunnels into a wide open, brilliant blueness.

She could see!

Amazed by the revelation, she watched breathlessly as she receded from the bronze colored, pock-marked surface at an alarming rate. As she continued to rise and her perspective widen, she saw the world that she had just departed gradually evolve into a spinning, donut like ring of fire, blazing orange against the deep blue backdrop.

She noted with interest that the overall luminosity of the ring was not uniform. At one place there was a defining line through which the fire passed as the ring revolved, where its brilliant glow was reduced by more than half, as if it were being devoured from within, causing the core of the ring to disappear. In one horrifying instant she realized that her instinct to reach the center had been leading her to that point in the ring. It had been leading her to death.

The total blueness surrounding her soon dissolved and she found herself under a steel gray sky on the vast formica plain. Three huge pyramids hovered in the near

distance. She was Bonnie Hampton and she was standing on the Plains of Metamor. The crevice that she had just come from was the heart of the Blue World.

She knew she would no longer be compelled to enter that disgusting chasm. From the moment she had gained her freedom from the repugnant tunnels, she knew that the spell had been broken.

Aware that she was wasting her time, she began to twirl in a circle. As her momentum began to build, she noticed a figure approaching her from a great distance. It was running towards her, waving, but she could no longer stop her twirling movement. A purple mist had billowed up in the distance, and as if by command, it quickly rolled towards her from across the windless plain.

12 El Paso

Her mind was made up the moment she heard the news from Deanna. She could see no other choice. It was something she should have done to begin with.

It would be nothing more than an overnight trip, but she hated to leave Credit for even a moment. Now, more than ever, she regretted the fact that she had talked Jason into going back to school. If Credit happened to awake while she was gone, it would be Deanna's face that he saw. But at least somebody would be there in case he regained consciousness.

His continuing coma had been stressful enough. The news that Teresa was now comatose was even more confusing. Had Credit's Indian friend snatched her once again? Would Teresa find a way to help him? Or had she become trapped in the same way as Credit? It was all so complex and frustrating.

Her own dreams had been meaningless, nightmarish images, inconsequential meanderings in those depressing blue tunnels. Her only consolation was that she now felt free of such nonsense.

Credit's dream world had been as real as the Earth. So vibrant and complete. But she would have to have the root powder in order to find it. And the only place she could find the root powder was in New Orleans.

13 El Paso

"Buckley!"

"Rawlings, sir. Thought you'd like to know, the Hampton woman just flew off to New Orleans."

"What's in New Orleans?"

"Don't know. We've got Taylor keeping an eye on her."

"I'll bet he is. I don't imagine he complained about that assignment."

"She's easy on the eyes, that's for sure."

"What about Lews?"

"No change."

"Is he all alone now?"

"The Logan woman is with him."

"Hmmm. Well, you stick with him. The doctors expect him to wake up at any time."

"They've been saying that since he was brought in. Look, Buck, this is pretty low key. Are you sure we need to waste two agents on this thing? I mean, the man's a third rate novelist with no political leanings, no criminal record..."

"That's just it! He does the very least possible to get along in society. He's hiding something and I want to know what it is. He was damn near dead when we brought him in and now he doesn't have a blemish on him. Except for the coma, he's fit as a fiddle. Not to mention the fact that he cost us a lot of time and money by blowing our operation. People upstairs aren't happy, and I need some answers. You got that?"

"Gotcha, boss!"

14 Flipside

"When are you planning on going back?" she hollered from the back room.

He slumped back on the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. A low groan escaped his throat. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"In the morning," he grumbled.

"What time?"

Why did she have to shout? "I don't know. Whenever. I'm not keeping to any time schedule." But he was suddenly very eager to get back home. He missed Texas.

"Do you want me to wake you in the morning?"

His sister was persistent.

"No!" Why, oh why, did she have to shout? What was she doing back there, anyway?

"I hardly had time to see you this visit!"

He lay back on the couch. One thing was for certain, he sure wasn't used to the barroom scene anymore. Half the counties back home were "dry".

The door bell rang and reverberated through his skull.

"Answer that, will ya?"

Before he could stand up the door swung open and in walked Tom and Dino.

"Hey! How's it going?" he asked, taken by surprise.

"Pretty good," Tom answered.

"We saw those Texas plates and figured you might be here. It's good to see you. You're looking sort of ragged."

"Yeah. I feel it, too." What were those jokers doing here? He was glad to see them, but he really wasn't in any mood for small talk.

"Is your sister here?"

"Edith? Yeah, she's in the back there. I think she's folding clothes or something." What did these guys want with his sister? He had presumed they were there to visit with him.

"We'll catch you in a little bit," Dino said as they headed into the back room.

"Yeah, later." Imagine that, he thought, feeling both relieved and a little bit insulted. They probably didn't have time for small talk, neither.

"I'm gonna head back to the Gold Nugget," he shouted into the back room.

"Are you coming back?" his sister asked.

"Yeah! I'll see you later."

His legs felt unnaturally heavy, as if they were stuck in cement. Although he had no problem getting through the front door, negotiating the sidewalk became a different matter. The harder he tried to move, the greater the resistance seemed to grow. And when he finally was able to gain some momentum, he found that he wasn't able to stop. He shot past the sidewalk, tripped over the curb, and sprawled face first into the street.

"Are you all right?"

Oh, jeez, someone had seen him. While he wasn't physically hurt, he was now totally embarrassed. Especially when he noticed the two college-age girls staring down at him. He assumed that they would be repulsed by his drunken condition and he felt somewhat ashamed.

Instead, they thought he was cute. He was amazed. They actually thought it was funny that he was so drunk.

"I'm on my way to the Nugget," he explained as they helped him to his feet. "You can see it from here," he added, pointing down the street.

Surely they would take exception to that, he thought. Already drunk and heading back for more. Even he wasn't sure why he was going back.

The girls didn't blink an eye.

"That's where we're headed!" they chirped in unison. "We'll walk you down there!"

Both girls were very attractive. While the bleached blond was a bit overdone for his conservative tastes, she had more spunk, the better figure, and greater initial sex appeal. The brunette was much more reserved. He knew that it was his lucky day. He couldn't lose with either one of them.

When they entered the tavern, the blond headed for the bar while he took a table with the brunette.

"I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new in town?" she politely asked.

"Just visiting. Name's Credit."

"Keri North. Glad to meet you," she cheerfully said.

As they shook hands over the table, he told her that she had a very attractive smile. The waitress appeared and they ordered drinks.

"So, where are you from, Credit?"

"Texas. Originally I came from this area. I've been visiting my sister." He saw that Keri was actually very beautiful. Strikingly so. Why hadn't he noticed before?

"How long are you in town for?" she asked.

"I'm leaving in the morning."

"Oh. Have you really got to go back so soon?"

She seemed genuinely disappointed. He was flattered.

"To tell you the truth, I have to go back to work. I'm broke."

She made no reply, but her expression encouraged him to explain further.

"I was in an accident out in West Texas and the hospital took all my money. Or all of my savings, anyway. I came up here to recuperate, but now I need to get back to work." His explanation sounded limp. He WAS there to recuperate, wasn't

he? His memory for detail was definitely hazy, and he blamed it on the beer. All he really knew was that something very pressing was drawing him back to Texas.

"You don't have a girl friend here, do you? Or a wife?"

"I'm not married," he replied, surprised by the twist in the conversation.

Keri leaned toward him and spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone. "Do you see that woman at the bar? The one my friend Sally is talking to?"

He clumsily glanced over his shoulder. The woman in question had her head turned so that he was unable to see her face. Even so, there was something about her that struck him as being very familiar.

"Yeah?" he replied, turning his attention back to Keri.

"She keeps staring over here. I think she's looking at you."

Doubt began to fester inside him. His only concrete memories originated from the time that he had been at his sister's house, and yet he had the vague notion that he had been at the tavern earlier that evening. After all, that was the reason why he felt so strange. He was drunk, wasn't he? Had he been with a woman then? Had he made promises that he was unable to recall?

"Is she still staring?" he giddily asked, afraid to look for himself.

"She just got up and left."

He quickly looked around and saw the empty space at the bar. Sally was talking to the person on the other side of her.

"So, what sort of work do you do?" Keri asked, resuming the conversation.

"I'm a writer."

Her interest noticeably perked.

"Is that so? What kind?"

"Novelist. Sort of, I guess. Lyricist."

She seemed elated. "Is that so? I'm an English teacher, myself." She looked at him with pleading, teasing eyes. "Maybe I've read you. What's your last name?"

"Lews. My pen name is C.L. Walker."

"I knew it!" she gleefully shouted. "I've read you. I have! Wayfarer, and Ride the Wild Wind." She was excited, impressed.

Her reactions were delightful. He was flattered to have such a young, beautiful woman so taken by him. She was intelligent and perceptive and, even more, she made him feel young and confident.

"Oh, look!"

He saw that the bartenders were dismantling the bar, which was both surprising and puzzling, since its construction was of heavy, antique walnut. They were

carrying away the slats as if they weighed nothing. Tables were also being cleared from the room. A band that he hadn't noticed before was playing gingerly, and a snaking conga line was beginning to form.

"Oh, let's join in!" Keri enthusiastically cried. She was bubbling with excitement. "If you feel up to it, I mean."

"Sure," he said, not wanting to disappoint her.

He grasped her waist from behind as they joined the line. Someone else clasped onto his shoulders and they slithered around the room with shouts and laughter and crazy gyrations.

And then it was over and the tavern began to empty.

"Wow. Where'd the time go?" he asked, disappointed. "I was hoping for another drink." And more time with Keri.

"Time to close up. Walk me home?" she cheerfully invited.

Lucky, lucky.

"I had a really fine time tonight," he said as they strolled down the boulevard. "I can't remember the last time I talked so much."

She edged closer to him and he put his arm around her waist. He began to wonder whether or not he should turn the topic of conversation to sex, when he noticed that she had become uncharacteristically despondent.

"Why so glum?"

"I guess I'm just feeling sorry for myself."

"Why's that?" It was her turn to be prodded.

"Because I'll only have known you for a few short hours. Is that silly?" She looked up at him with big, brown eyes. "Are you sure you have to go back to Texas this morning? Do you have a schedule or a deadline to meet?"

"No. There are other reasons why I have to go," he replied without thinking.

"I didn't mean to pry."

"You didn't. It's just that I can't talk about them now." Because he couldn't remember! He couldn't remember anything prior to the moment he found himself in a drunken state on his sister's couch. Still, he simply couldn't shake the persistent feeling that he had to get back to Texas. But for something other than work. The only way to resolve the dilemma would be to leave as soon as possible.

"Good grief. It's morning already!" he exclaimed when he noticed the skyline.

"We closed up the place, remember?" Keri pleasantly countered. Hesitantly she added, "Will I ever get to see you again?"

He knew she could sense his eagerness to be gone and he hoped that she did not interpret his aloofness as rejection. He liked her very much and was glad that they had met, but he also knew that they would probably never meet again.

Keri kissed him softly, whispered good-by, and then ran lightly towards her house.

That image of her stuck in his mind as he made his way to his truck. He wondered why he had been so obstinate. What difference would a few hours or a day have made?

Deciding to fill his tank before entering the Interstate, he pulled into a small, run down gas station. As he began to pump his gas, he remembered that in his haste to get away he had forgotten to say good-by to his sister. Damn! He could be such an ass at times.

He replaced the gas cap and headed towards the shack to pay. When he stepped inside he saw that the building was much larger than it had appeared from the outside, and was in fact a small restaurant. Ten or twelve tables were separated by an aisle that led to the cash register. A customer was paying her bill. An old man and a teen-ager waited on her from behind the counter.

Credit glanced around the room and saw four old men and two elderly couples eating dinner. In one corner, two old men were playing checkers in front of a wood burning stove.

"Thank-you, ma'am. You come back now. Next."

Credit stepped up to the register. "Hi. I want to pay for gas."

The teen-ager looked down at the meter. "That'll be \$68.47."

"Are you sure?" Credit calmly asked. Inwardly he was alarmed. Was this little hick joint trying to rip him off? He had figured that the gas would be more expensive here than across the street at the modern station, but that had been busy and he was in a hurry. "That can't be right. I'm in that little S-10 pick-up. There's no way that it'll even hold that much gas." He pointed through the screen door.

"You must be charging me for that van out there."

"Well, don't get so excited, lad," the old man said. "How much did you pump?"

"I think it was \$11.75, but I really don't remember now. I'd have to go back out and look."

"That's all right. \$11.75 will work. Kenny?"

Credit held out a twenty dollar bill. The boy popped open the cash register and studied it for a moment. "I ain't got no change, dad," he drawled.

The old man spit into a can. "Well, I guess I'd best go and get some then, don't cher think?" He rounded the counter and crossed the room in slow motion.

Credit noticed that all the people in the room were staring his way. Feeling very self-conscious, he decided to follow the man outside.

"I'm just going to move my truck away from the pumps," he explained. There was no further access with both his truck and the van parked there, and it sounded like a polite excuse to get away from prying eyes.

He pulled up under a tree at the side of the shack and swung open his door. He decided to wait there until the man returned with the change. Behind the restaurant, the side street was very tightly lined with old, two-story apartment houses. Two long haired boys sat on the upstairs porch of the house directly in front of him. They were passing a joint between them.

He was becoming thoroughly exasperated waiting on the old man. He looked again and when he didn't see him, he contemplated leaving without paying. It would be easy to pull out the back way unnoticed. The two boys across the street wouldn't know any better, and probably wouldn't care.

He looked once more for the man and found him approaching. He stepped out of the truck and followed him into the shack. He handed the boy a twenty dollar bill and the boy gave him back his twenty, a ten, two fives, two ones, and some change.

Credit handed the money back to him. "No, no. I only gave you a twenty, man. The gas was \$11.75." Thinking that the boy must be mentally slow, Credit smiled politely.

The old man closely scrutinized the transaction as the boy once again attempted to hand out change. He gave Credit a twenty, three tens, a five, a one, and some change.

"Nah, you're giving me way too much," he protested, irritated by the continuing delay.

"Take the money," the old man instructed in a stern voice. "Trust me. I counted along."

Credit wasn't about to argue. He said thank-you, put away his money, and left the shack feeling totally smug about the situation.

What a bunch of dumb dolts, he grumbled as he approached his pick-up. No wonder they had run out of change.

He opened the door of his truck and noticed a dark haired woman sitting on the passenger side. It was the woman who had been watching him at the tavern, the woman who often appeared in his dreams. It was his helper!

What in the world was she doing here? He wondered. This shouldn't be possible! Keeping his gaze away from her face, he climbed into the cab.

"Well, I see you blew your chance to get laid," she commented lightly.

"What do you care?" he haughtily replied. His relationship with Keri had ended both stupidly and selfishly, but he was damned if he'd let her in on it.

"So where are you heading, cowboy?"

"Going back to Texas. I need to get home."

"Do you think you'll find it from here?"

"Not at the rate I'm going, I won't."

She gave him a look of concern and puzzlement as she carefully studied him.

"Do you know who you are?"

"Benjamin Franklin," he sarcastically answered.

"And does old Ben walk through time?"

Walk through time? Before he had a chance to question the term, hazy memories inundated him.

"I've been in the past," he announced. "I visited great civilizations in Peru and Mexico, and a not so great civilization at Oraibi."

"I know. I was at Oraibi. Where else have you been?" She stared hard at him. Credit's aura was becoming increasingly blurred, making it almost impossible for her to read his memories.

Highly skeptical of her claim, he abruptly dismissed her question. There was simply no way that she could have been at Oraibi. Or was there? He quickly glanced at his helpers face. He was forced to admit that her resemblance to the little girl, Sparrow, was indeed uncanny.

"This is the first time I have ever seen your face," he uttered in amazement.

"That's because you've never taken a good look before."

"I don't know your name, either."

"Because you've never really asked. I am Sparrow of the Broken Ledge. Sparrow, for short." She howled with glee.

Bullshit, he reassured himself. There was no way she could be over five-hundred years old!

"How come you're still alive?" he asked.

"I'm not alive on Earth," she replied. "You still haven't caught on. Where do you think you are?"

"Well, I assumed that I was in Buffalo, and that I'd been at my sister's house," he grouched. "Evidently that's not true or you wouldn't be asking." He hated her smug tone of voice.

"You're hopeless! You know that? And to think that when we first met, I thought you were the savior of my people."

"I'm nobody's savior!" he exclaimed.

"And you're nowhere near Buffalo, either. You're dreaming."

What? Damn! This was all a dream! That explained why the woman was there. He was in Tunu! Never in a million years would he have reached Texas. While he could jump through Tunu at will, he would have to pass through the purple mist to reach the Earth.

"I trip when I go through the mist," he solemnly confessed. "I end up dancing through time. I'm afraid I'll never find my way back home."

"Forget the purple mist! If you really want to get home, all you have to do..." She paused for effect, glaring at him with those big, black eyes. "...is wake up!"

Wake up? She just didn't understand, did she?

"I just told you. I can't get through the god-damned mist in order to wake up!"
The stupid bitch.

"And I'm saying you've become consumed by the purple mist. It is nothing more than a visualization of the process. You'd be best off if you never saw it again! You never should have come here in the first place. Bonnie's waiting for you. You need to wake up."

She gave him a quick, sharp shove. As he tumbled backwards, he was forced to open his eyes.

15 New Orleans

Although amply forewarned by the approaching claps of thunder, the throng of tourists was nevertheless drenched and scattered by the sudden, intense downpour.

Already totally discouraged by her own personal chain of events, Bonnie huddled inside the entrance way of a souvenir shop. She shivered as she watched the gusting wind carry the rain down the street in torrents, reducing visibility to mere inches. The storm was an appropriate ending to a long night of disappointment.

She had been so confident in her initial plan; to return to the House of Voodoo and procure another vial of root powder from Lena. So simple. But nothing had worked out as she had planned.

The House of Voodoo was not where she remembered it to be. There was nothing there but a solid brick wall.

Thinking that she had been mistaken in her recollection, she decided to retrace the steps that she and Credit had taken on the night of their engagement. She started at Arnaud's, visited Jackson Square, even sat down for a drink at Old Toone's. But on her stroll back down Bourbon Street she simply could not locate the House of Voodoo. She searched several of the side streets and asked questions in all of the other voodoo shops. Nothing. It was as if it had never existed.

Tired and discouraged, yet not knowing what else to do, she looped back to Arnaud's and started over again. This time the old black man with the saxophone stood at the corner of Bourbon Street, giving her a flicker of hope. She offered the man some money and he played "La Cucaracha". She fed him some more money and he played the same tune all over again. Idiocy. Neither would he respond to her questions. And so she left. When the rain followed, it put a final damper on her hopes.

She knew of no other way to locate the Jamaican woman and obtain the special root powder. She had to admit that she would never be able to help Credit. She

decided that when the rain ended, she would return to the hotel and call Deanna. Tomorrow she would fly back to El Paso.

The downpour had moderately slowed, enabling her to see to the other side of the street. Directly across from her was a tavern brilliantly lit with neon, advertising naked dancers. Next to it was a private entrance. She watched with interest as that door opened and a giant of a man stepped out into the rain. The moment she saw his frazzled, orange hair and long coat, she recognized him as the pirate who had grabbed her on her last visit. He motioned to her with a friendly gesture.

Her heartbeat quickened.

Should she cross the street? Did she dare?

Surprising even herself, she compulsively made a mad dash through the still driving rain. She arrived completely soaked, and was quickly ushered through the door and up a flight of stairs, where she was met by the voodoo woman, Lena.

It came as no surprise.

The red giant returned to the street while she was led into a dimly lit apartment.

"Please, follow me and we will find you some dry clothes. Camrod will be along shortly. He wants to make sure that you are not being followed," Lena said.

"I came alone," Bonnie assured, wondering why they would be suspicious. She changed clothes and was then led into the den. As she gazed about the room, she

was amazed by the bulging book shelves and the preponderance of decorative knick-knacks and keepsakes. She saw precious stones, gold and porcelain statues, and old pictures in antique silver frames. It was all in very good taste, but contrasted sharply with Credit's theme of simplicity.

"I did not expect to see you again so soon," Lena said. "I hope my gift to you was not the cause of any misfortune."

Before Bonnie could begin to answer, a thin, wiry man stepped into the room. He was of medium height, with matted, brown hair. He nodded at her before silently taking a seat in the corner.

"Well?" Lena demanded after impatiently waiting for him to speak. "I take it she is being followed?"

"DEA," he replied casually. "Maybe FBI."

Bonnie was mildly stunned. Why would anyone be following her? "Are you sure it's not drug smugglers?" she weakly asked.

The man nodded his head negatively. "It's the U.S. government," he confidently replied.

Instinctively, Bonnie knew that it was true. While Jason and Deanna had been extensively questioned, she had been conspicuously ignored. She felt a mounting tide of apprehension as she wondered about their motives.

"You can believe what Camrod says," Lena offered, misreading Bonnie's silence.

"I thought Camrod was the man downstairs," Bonnie said as she glanced at the lean newcomer sitting in the corner.

"You mean the giant?" Lena mused with a grin. "He is the same man. Camrod is a shape changer."

Immediately, the man stood up from his chair and Bonnie saw a monstrous pirate looming over her, orange hair, eye-patch, gold buttons and all. And then in a moment he was gone, replaced by the smaller, slender Camrod.

"Once you have seen me as I truly am," he explained to the astonished woman, "it takes too much effort to retain other forms."

"Who are you people?" Bonnie stuttered, suddenly regretting her impetuous journey to New Orleans. "How did you get mixed up with Credit? Do you dream like he does?"

"No," Camrod answered. "Our talents are much different. I am a shape changer while Lena merely likes to meddle."

Lena blushed. "You and Credit were the most striking couple in the Quarters the night of your engagement," she explained. "It was obvious that you belonged together. But knowing how sluggish men can be, I took it upon myself to make for you a love potion. But then Camrod reported that Credit was no fool, that he saw Camrod as he really is, and I decided that it would be best to consult the

bones. They indicated Credit's emerging powers. Being afraid that it would cause the two of you to drift apart, I prepared the root mixture. If my interference caused you any misfortune, I regret it deeply, and humbly apologize. My intentions were for the best."

"We really are on your side," Camrod added.

"I am the one who should apologize," Bonnie said. "For being so mistrustful of you both." She looked candidly at Camrod. "I was not aware that I was being followed."

"So, tell us why you have returned to New Orleans."

"Credit's son and another friend were kidnapped by drug smugglers in the Big Bend of West Texas. Credit learned about it in a dream. With the aide of your gift, I was able to join him in his dream and we were able to successfully rescue them. But now Credit has fallen into a coma, along with another friend of ours, a Mexican curandera. You helped us once, and I was hoping you could do so again. That is why I came looking for you. You are my last hope. I need the root powder, and I am willing to pay whatever you ask." Hands shaking, Bonnie fumbled for her purse.

"Put your money away," Lena said as she stood and paced the small sitting room.

"What of your own dreams since the night you took the root mixture?"

"Nightmares," Bonnie replied, dejected. "Until last night, recurring dreams that made no sense."

"Describe them."

"They were basically all the same. I would find myself beneath a formica plain, bouncing through a series of pitch black tunnels, drawn towards the center by a repugnant force that I could only sense. I didn't even know who I was there. The dreams were stifling and oppressive, and a total waste."

"You said 'up until last night.' What did you mean by that?"

"Last night I broke free from the force that compelled me to navigate the tunnels. I'm hoping that I have broken the spell that drew me to that world, but I won't know until tonight, and then it may be too late. Credit's world was rich and complete. I need the root powder to take me there."

"I'm not so sure that's the direction we should take," Lena uttered after a moment of thoughtful silence. "We should consult the bones."

Without further hesitation, she left the room.

"The bones never lie," Camrod said with a comforting smile.

Lena promptly returned and knelt on the hardwood floor. Carefully but deftly, she unwrapped her bones from the fine silk scarf.

"I will toss them three times," she announced. "The first time is for you, the second time for Credit, and the third time for prophecy. Please adjust your thoughts accordingly."

Without further pretense, she gathered up the bones and held them to her bosom. She tilted her head upwards as she chanted incoherently, and then ended her litany with a crisp, short shout before gently rolling the bones onto the floor. She studied the patterns with an intense glare, and then twice more repeated her ritual.

"Well?" Bonnie blurted after patiently waiting for Lena to re-wrap the bones in the silk scarf.

"Credit may already have regained consciousness."

Oh damn, she thought, and the first face he'll see is Deanna's. She never should have come to New Orleans. She should have trusted Teresa. She should have had faith that the old woman would find Credit and lead him out of his coma.

"Are you sure he's awake?"

"No. The bones are hard to interpret because you both dream and exercise duality. It entwines your awareness in a manner that is confusing to me."

"I was only able to dream because of your root powder."

"You are wrong. The root powder ignited your own innate ability. Now it will no longer benefit you because you are the same as Credit. The bones were very clear

on that. You need to reach for the auburn light instead of the blue light to which you have been drawn."

Nonsense, Bonnie thought. "Have you a telephone? I need to call Credit."

"That may not be a good idea," Camrod warned. "If the DEA has taken the trouble to have you followed, it is most certain that they have tapped the hospital telephone."

"But they're our government. Why should I be afraid of them? I've done nothing wrong."

"All governments are dangerous," he casually replied. "Political ideology is carefully scrutinized these days. Even though it was not planned on your part, you became involved with international drug smuggling. You used powers never before seen. It is only natural that the authorities are curious. I am sure they feel threatened in their own paranoid way."

"But if I can't go back, what can I do? Surly they are waiting for Credit to wake up. I have to return to El Paso."

Camrod turned to Lena. "What was the prophecy of the bones?"

Bonnie waited breathlessly.

"Change is inevitable. There are powerful forces at work, and events that begin slowly will soon tumble one into another. Bonnie Hampton and Credit Lews are

integral to that flow," Lena cryptically announced. She looked at Bonnie. "If you want to meet up with him, dear, your direction is south."

"Why south? Where?"

"Mexico, I suspect. In Credit's case, to aid your friend, the curandera. In your case, to elude those who follow you."

Bonnie sat down in the chair. "I don't know what to do," she moaned with an air of hopelessness.

"Stay here tonight," Camrod suggested, "and we can have you in Mexico City by tomorrow afternoon."

As she struggled uncomfortably with the possibilities, she remembered the old black man wailing out "La Cucaracha" on his saxophone, and instantly her mind was made up.

She had no other choice but to go with the flow.

17 Sierra Blanca

He took a deep, full breath of the cool, early morning air and then settled back into the car.

"Were you able to reach Mark?" he asked as Deanna turned the key in the ignition.

"Yes. He wasn't too happy that I woke him at four-thirty in the morning, but...I told him that you were finally awake and in good health, although a little weak, and that I wouldn't be home for a couple more days. I explained that Bonnie was

in New Orleans and you needed to see Teresa, he knows what her condition is, but I don't think he liked it very much."

"Look, I don't want to get you into any trouble..."

"You're not! Mark wished you well. Did you talk to Bonnie?"

"No." He felt that she was deliberately changing the subject. "The hotel says she's out and hasn't checked in all night."

"Are you worried?"

"Sure. But she's a big girl now. She can take care of herself, just like you," he grinned.

He knew that his flippancy was a poor shield for his concern. He was quite aware that if he had awakened right after seeing Teresa, Bonnie would not have had any reason to go to New Orleans. They would be together now. Whatever possessed him to go to Tunu? He slumped down on the seat and closed his eyes.

"I did speak to Jason, though. He seemed relieved that I was conscious."

"How's he doing?"

"Good. He said he has a fourteen year old room mate." Credit chuckled.

"Fourteen?"

“A prodigy. He said the kid’s amazing. Smarter than Hell. He said he’s helped him in a lot of ways.”

"You look tired," Deanna observed. "How do you feel?"

"Weak. The food helped, but now I need to sleep again, of all things. Do you mind? Are you all right to drive?"

"I'm fine. You just remember to wake up this time, OK?"

He gave her a wink and then closed his eyes.

18 Bonnie/Flipside

Finally satisfied with the fit of her new dress, she sat back down in front of the mirror to recheck her make-up. She knew that her mother would be furious if she saw her like that. It made her appear so much older than she was.

The bedroom door jiggled.

"Randy, you brat! Get away!" she screamed. She hopped across the room and flung open the door.

"Momma's gonna be mad at you!" he teased as he darted out of reach.

"She's gonna be madder at you when she finds out you've been watching me get dressed again, you little brat!" She lunged at him but badly missed.

"You kids cut it out up there!" came her mother's voice from downstairs.

"You've got a crush on Credit! You've got a crush on Credit!" Randy sang in a muted tone.

Bonnie ignored her brother's jibes. She grabbed her shawl and hurried down the hallway, determined to leave the house before her mother had a chance to see her.

Halfway down the steps, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" she heard her mother holler.

Oh, no! Her mother caught her as she opened the front door.

"Where do you think you're going all made up like that?" her mother whined, ignoring the visitor on the door steps. "You're still a young girl. That old man ain't gonna take no notice of you. He ain't got no business even looking at you!" she added in a shrill voice.

"This is my ride, mom. Gotta go! Bye!" Bonnie grabbed the startled visitor by the arm and marched her back down the sidewalk.

"Oh, please," she pleaded in a whisper. "I know you don't know me, but be a friend and play along. Please, I beg you. It's the only way I'll get to see Credit. You can give me a ride to the school, can't you?"

"Sure," the dark haired woman agreed. "No problem. We'll be there in a jiff."

She wasn't lying. As soon as Bonnie sat down in the car and closed the door, they were there. At least she wouldn't be late. She reopened the car door and climbed out.

"If you'd like to stay and see the show, you're welcome to come backstage with me," Bonnie gratefully offered.

"That's very nice of you," the woman said. "I think I'd like that."

They made their way through the school corridors to the dressing room, where Bonnie changed into her dancing costume, along with twenty-nine other girls. She felt dismayed by the fact that Credit would never even notice her. If he could only see her in her new dress and make-up instead of that silly costume, she sighed, he would surely be impressed.

"Let's go, girls! We're on!"

They filed out of the dressing room to the backstage waiting area, and within minutes she was dancing like she had never danced before. She was awed and inspired by the vastness of the audience and the sheer capacity of the auditorium. It was so huge! She feared that she would never be able to spot Credit, but he shone like a beacon in the audience, and she could not take her eyes from him. She danced only for him, and when he glanced her way and smiled, she thought that she would faint.

When the choreography ended, she hurried back to the dressing room. Her friend was waiting for her there.

"Credit noticed me! If I hurry and change, I might be able to 'accidentally' bump into him," she coyly revealed.

"You do realize that you're dreaming, don't you?" the woman politely asked.

Oh no, just like mother, Bonnie silently moaned to herself. And here she had begun to take a liking to her newfound friend, was even beginning to think of her as a big sister or confidant. She had hoped that if anyone could understand her longing for Credit, this woman could.

"Look," Bonnie replied. "I know that I'm younger than he is, but we're right for each other. We're the same, you know? Maybe I am dreaming, but I won't know until he notices me, until he knows who I am. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"No! You really are dreaming!" the woman reiterated. "This is all a dream." She spread her arms wide as if to encompass everything with her declaration. "I am Credit's friend, Sparrow. Welcome to Tunu."

Bonnie finally understood. She was dreaming! This was the moment that she had been praying for!

More than that, Credit was nearby! He was out there!

She pulled her dress over her shoulders, flung open the dressing room door, and strode straight into the purple mist.

19 Flipside

They loped through desert chaparral until they reached the dry, wooded creek bed.

Credit cleared a place in the shade beneath the foliage and offered Deanna a seat.

She declined, preferring instead to lean against the undercut sandstone bank.

"It sure is hot," he mumbled as he sat down in the spot he had cleared for her.

"It's unbearable. I'm glad we got the tents set up without any trouble. I don't think I could have taken it much longer in the sun," she replied.

"I'm dripping with sweat. I don't see how Jason and Mark can stand it out there. They know we came down here, don't they?"

"I told Mark where I was going," Deanna huffed. "If he doesn't want to follow, that's his tough shit. I just can't stand that sun."

It was hard not to notice the animosity in her voice, especially since he had listened to her and Mark arguing for the entire ride out there. Definitely not a happy couple.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm the same as I've always been," she snapped. Her tone was sharp, bitter.

"If you want to talk about it, you know, I'm here."

"Well, I don't want to talk about it!"

She glared hatefully at him before stomping away up the stream bed, ducking clumsily out of the way of overhanging branches, cursing as she went. It was obvious that she did not want him tagging along.

Well shit, he thought. He sure blew that. He hopped up out of the wash and headed for the campsite. He saw Jason standing behind the truck sipping on a Coke.

"Where's Mark?" Credit asked.

Without replying, his son motioned towards the unpaved road.

"What's he doing?"

"How should I know?" Jason irritably answered. "He got pissed off and walked away."

"Why?"

"What do you think? You're down there messing around with his wife."

"We weren't doing anything."

"Well, he doesn't know that. What the hell's wrong with you, anyway? You know better than to mess around with a married woman."

Credit was taken back by his son's criticism. It was so sharp and to the point.

Feeling guilty, he strolled up to the road. He spied Mark three or four-hundred yards down the gravel track, past the shallow valley and up against the base of a colossal, sheer mountain wall.

"There's Mark down there."

Jason had crept up behind him and was pointing.

"Yeah, I see him. I guess I'd better go talk to him, huh?" He looked at his son for confirmation.

"That would probably be best," Jason concurred as their eyes met.

Their moment was shattered by the frightening sound of an explosion that ripped through the air, and when they looked they saw the sheer mountain wall crumbling into a gigantic pile of rubble. An immense cloud of dust was rising into the sky.

"My god!" Jason shouted. "Mark's been buried alive!"

They hurried down the road to the devastation. Other people were beginning to gather.

"Did you see it happen?" Credit asked as they ran.

"No. But Mark was standing there only a moment ago. There's no way he could have gotten away in time. He's gotta be under that pile."

Credit felt crushed. Jason's voice began to sound distant. Time and images seemed fleeting. He remembered furiously clearing the rubble, tossing aside incredibly huge boulders as if they weighed nothing at all. But was Mark ever found? He simply could not recall. It had all become so vague and distant.

When he entered the outskirts of town he obeyed the traffic sign by reducing his speed. He turned onto a familiar side street and then cruised slowly past the high school. A small group of people were gathered in front of the three-story, limestone building.

"This is it."

"It looks so small," Jason said with a chuckle.

"It's bigger on the inside," Credit replied, intending his comment as dry humor.

He found a spot at the curb and parked the car.

"Let's walk around the building. I want to see what changes they've made over the years."

He discovered that the windows had been tinted and air conditioning added. The only other alteration was in the grounds. The lawn was thicker and greener and the once young maples had grown into fine shade trees. The institution was a pillar of stability.

When they reached the front door, they found that the people who had been gathered there had dispersed.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" Credit asked.

"Shit, yeah! I want to see all the old farts you went to school with!"

"Well, I know that all the trouble we've been through has put you behind schedule, and this is liable to be rather boring, so any time you want to leave, you know, you just head out. OK?"

"Geez, Lews, where the hell have you been? The sewer? It's good to see that you've become such a thriving success."

Strickland! He knew it the moment he heard the voice. Of all the people to run into first.

"We've just come in from the desert," he said as he held out his hand to the approaching figure. Big deal, he thought. So what if he was wearing blue jeans, a pull over shirt, and nice comfortable hiking boots. This wasn't a formal affair.

"This is my son, Jason."

Strickland was smartly dressed in a designer suit and tie and every hair on his head was immaculately placed. It even looked like he was wearing make-up. He must have spent hours in front of the mirror. His wife clung tightly to his arm, but it was evident that she had yet to acknowledge that she was within five-hundred miles of the place.

"I'll talk to you later, loser," Strickland smirked as he strutted off with his woman.

"Look at that," Credit whispered to his son. "I believe he's got an armadillo tail stuck up his ass." The years had definitely been good to Strickland. He had been able to refine his snobbery just marvelously.

"See what I mean?" Credit said after his old classmate disappeared through the doors. "This reunion is going to be something else. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Shit, yeah. This is going to be funny as hell."

"If it wasn't for wanting to see David, I don't think I'd be doing this."

"What the hell. It's your class reunion."

"Let's take a seat. I think we're late as it is."

True to his prior statement, the school was much larger on the inside than reason would predict. The auditorium looked like it could seat ten thousand people, and it was filled to capacity. As they sat through a succession of Las Vegas style shows, supposedly prepared by the present student body but entirely too lavish and elaborate for such a small school, Credit attempted to locate his former classmates.

He nudged Jason. "Look over there. All those jokers are sitting in a row. There's Joel, Tom, Dino, Sherman, Phil. They must have gotten together before this started. And there's David! All right. I need to apologize to that sun-of-a-gun after this is over."

He watched his old friends. As if on cue, each one of them suddenly raised a trumpet to his lips and began to accompany the main orchestra. It occurred to Credit that they were part of the show, which struck him as being very odd indeed.

Jason nudged him. "Who's that red-head?"

"What red-head?"

"The one on stage. She's been staring at you since their number started. I think she likes you," he joshed.

Credit studied the girl. A little chubby, he judged, but overall not a bad looking little girl. Despite all the intricate dance steps, she continued to gaze his way without missing a beat.

He smiled at her and then turned to Jason. "Don't be silly. She's more your age. I think she's staring at you."

He returned his attention to his former classmates, hoping that one of them would notice him, but they were all concentrating on their cue for more horns.

When the show ended, the auditorium began to empty. Credit caught sight of David's backside as he entered the hallway beneath the seats.

"I need to catch up to him," he said to Jason.

"OK. I think I'm gonna be heading out now. This lasted longer than I thought it would. I think I'd best get a start on it."

"Yeah, OK. Well, you take care now, all right? I'll catch you at semester break or something."

"Yeah, OK. Have fun!"

Jason disappeared into the crowd.

Credit wandered the hallways without locating David. When he decided to step outside, he spied his friend climbing into a van parked at the curb. He ran after him, shouting.

David appeared delighted. "Why, there's Credit! I didn't think you were going to make it!"

"Yeah, really. I almost didn't. As you can see, I came as I was." He needlessly pointed out his apparel.

"I want to apologize for running out on you that last time. We don't get to see each other all that often."

"Hey, no sweat. I figured you had a good reason," David replied.

"Where are you heading to now? We need to get together sometime while we're here. I really need to talk to you."

"We're going over to my parent's house. Come on over. Do you need a ride?"

"No. I'll follow you over there. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Credit headed for his truck. Before he knew it, he had completely encircled the school. He felt confused. He had been so excited at the prospect of talking with David that he had by-passed his truck. He had driven his truck, hadn't he? He wondered why his memory had become so spotty.

He decided to circle the school once more. The next thing he knew, he was roaming the quiet, business district near the center of town. When he stopped to browse a store front window, it occurred to him that he had completely forgotten what it was he had intended to do. His lack of focus was becoming an irritant.

As he stared at his reflection in the window, it dawned on him that his intention had been to visit David. He should have accepted his offer for a ride. Jason had taken the car to return to college! Why had he forgotten that? Now he would probably never get to see David. He had blown it again.

As he became increasingly frustrated with himself, he felt a jolt. He noticed the sound of a motor and wondered if David had returned to fetch him.

When he turned around he found a station wagon parked at the curb. Sparrow sat in the driver's seat.

"Need a ride?" she asked.

He sluggishly stepped around the car and got in.

"You know, I'm really getting tired of having to tote you kids around," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"To David's. I need to talk to him," he flatly stated. What kids? He wondered. He was getting tired of her innocuous statements.

"It sounds important, but you could be wasting your time," she commented as she studied him. "Do you even know where you are?"

"Do you?"

"Why are you so hostile?"

"Why are you such a know-it-all? How do you know so much about me, anyway?"

"I've already explained that to you. You carry your memories in your aura. Or you used to. Since you awoke from your coma, I've only been able to glimpse a few of them, and those were quick to blur."

Good, he commented to himself. It wasn't none of her damn business anyway.

She looked at him with intense, dark eyes.

"You still don't realize that you're in Tunu," she softly stated, breaking the moment of silence. "You are healed from your accident, so you can no longer use that as an excuse. But there is something wrong with you. Perhaps you should re-evaluate your trips to Metamor. They have zapped your continuity and hindered your progress. And it's time you gathered your wits about you. I know they're not much, but they're all that you have."

Shit. What did she know? He had been on the very verge of learning the mysteries to Creation when something had yanked him out of Metamor and straight into Tunu. Had it been Sparrow? Was she the one responsible?

Feeling tired and betrayed, he slumped down on the seat of the car.

"Push me," he demanded. He needed to enter the mist and return to Metamor.

Shaking her head with disbelief, Sparrow tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and then watched with sadness as he slowly faded away.

Totally exhausted, he stepped outside and sat down on the steps of the veranda. His body felt weak from both the long ride and the time spent in the coma. His mind was numb from the sight of Teresa.

"What do you think?" Deanna softly asked. She squint her eyes in the bright morning light. "It looks like she's in pain to me."

"Could be. At least she's alive."

"Do you think you can help her?"

"I don't know."

He had rerun the sequences of their encounter over and over again in his mind. And the only conclusion he could draw was that he didn't understand one bit of what he had witnessed.

"I need to go to Mexico City."

"You mentioned that before. Why Mexico City?"

"Just north of there. To the Teotihuacan ruins. I need to see if what I dreamed actually took place."

Deanna looked at him in silence.

"My concentration still isn't very good," he explained. "It's hard to focus my thoughts while I'm worried about Teresa, and Bonnie and Jason, and I'm also worried about you and Mark. You need to call him again and make sure he's all right." The segment of his last dream about Mark dying had definitely spooked him.

"We're both all right. Don't worry about us."

"Well, I do. So I'll make a deal with you. Take me to Presidio where I can catch the train, and then go home. Please."

"No!" she exclaimed. "I won't do it. Mark and I can work things out later. You're not strong enough to be on your own yet, and besides, I'm the cause of all this,

remember? You saved my life, so I'm in this until the end. I have to see it through. Besides, Mexico City sounds rather appealing right now."

He had seen this resolve in Deanna before. Despite his misgivings, he knew that he did not have the strength to change her mind.

"Then we might as well get going," he reluctantly agreed. "Teresa's in good hands with her niece. We'll only get in the way here."

21 Presidio

"Buckley here."

"Rawlings, boss. Just wanted to let you know, you were right. Lews slipped out of the hospital last night. Without paying, I might add. I tailed him and the Logan woman to the Big Bend, where they looked in on the old Mexican woman. Right now we're in Presidio. They're taking the train to Chihuahua City, and from there they have airline reservations to Mexico City. Something's up."

"What's his physical condition like?"

"Seems all right to me. The woman's done most of the driving."

"Well, you make sure you stay with them. There's been a bad earthquake in Acapulco, so there's liable to be a lot of congestion. I suppose that you're aware that Taylor lost the Hampton woman?"

"What? How?"

"She disappeared in the French Quarter. Walked into a topless joint and never came back out."

"That dumb ass. She's a model, for chist's sakes, how hard can it be...uh, oh!

Train's pulling out. Gotta go!"

Click.

"Damn!"

22 Teotihuacan

"...the fading of the owl is just as much a mystery as its initial appearance three days ago. But as you can see, it is still a very colorful, dazzling portrayal, with precise, minute detail. And yet is not an artistic expression in the least. There is nothing applied to the surface; no paint, no dye, no chalk. Our experts agree that the coloration goes to the very core of the rock, an amazing transformation of the chemical composition of the stone."

"Miraculous," a tourist commented.

"The power of the ancients!" another pronounced.

"Do you think it's religious in nature?"

The guide smiled diplomatically. "I would not care to speculate," she courteously replied. "The people who built Teotihuacan worshipped nature in all aspects, including the owl. However, as you can see by the motifs outside this temple, indeed, all over the archaeological site, the quetzal was valued more than any other bird."

"Do you see any correlation between this and the disastrous earthquakes of the past two days, especially the one this morning in Acapulco?"

"The power of the ancients! The end is near!"

Annoyed by the idiotic speculation, Credit pulled Deanna from the crowded temple and led her back to the Plaza of the Moon.

"And you think the owl is Teresa's spirit?" she asked.

"I know it is."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. I had to see this for myself to believe it. In a lot of ways, I'm just as confused as you are. Maybe more so. I only hope I can find a way to help."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure," he replied as he studied the lengthening shadows. "They're fixing to close the place down for the night. Why don't we go get something to eat, and then come back here to the parking lot. I want to spend the night on the site. Maybe the karma will help my dreams."

"Sleep in the car?"

"That'll work. Other people are staying here."

"They're mostly a bunch of kooks, Credit! There are several motels about three miles down the road," she suggested.

"I'm not stupid!" he lashed back. "Get a damn motel room, if you want. I just told you, I'm going to sleep here."

"You don't have to be so curt."

His tone was not entirely unintentional. The portentous nature of his last dream had heightened his feelings of guilt about being with Deanna. It seemed that every dream he ever had about the woman was ominous. She just looked so damn good. And the more his strength returned, the more appealing she became. It made for a delicate situation. Although he had no desire to be unfaithful to Bonnie, the thought of a motel room scared him.

He needed to concentrate on helping Teresa. And in order to do that, he had to slow the purple mist and find the portal to the Blue World. He had to return to Metamor to learn the Mysteries of Creation.

23 Bonnie/Flipside

It was a lovely day as she sauntered down the rustic country lane that ran through the meadow. She especially enjoyed the cool, sharp shadows cast by the rows of tall pines that lined the deeply rutted sand road. It was a pleasure to hear the ever changing symphony of the birds that gathered there.

She was glad that she had decided to go for a walk. Instead of planting the exotic shrubs next to the house as she had originally planned, she was going to surprise Credit and plant them at their favorite romantic setting.

He would get angry, of course. He would rail at her for introducing a foreign species, but he'd get over it. When the plants flowered in the spring, he would compliment her for what she had done.

The lane crossed the beginnings of a small, dry drainage, and she turned onto the trail that ran along side it. To her delight, she noticed that the drainage was soon flowing water, coursing clear and lively over a limestone bed. Credit had mentioned that the creek was spring fed, but she hadn't believed him because she had never before seen water there.

When she approached a high bluff, she saw an old man and a boy fishing a deep hole. Around the bend were more fishermen. They came as a complete surprise, since the area was totally isolated. Never before had she met people out there.

As she continued on her way she discovered that the water had risen out of the creek banks and spread across the narrow canyon bottom, submerging the trail. She knew that the flooded conditions would make for a stupendous waterfall at their favorite place, something she had often imagined, and it was a sight she was suddenly very anxious to see.

She attempted to cross the widening creek on a narrow, downed tree, but lost her balance and fell knee deep into the water. She was thankful that she had missed the actual creek channel. The deep water and current could have swept her away. When she reached dry land, she found another trail that led to a wide, sandy

beach. A teen-age boy was approaching her. He was wearing a swim suit and carrying a towel.

"Is there a way to get to the waterfalls?" she asked when he smiled at her.

"Yeah, but you've got to be on the other side," he replied as he unconsciously flexed his muscles. He turned and pointed down the creek. "If you go stand next to those canoes, one of the girls will come and ferry you across."

He courteously nodded his head, flipped the towel over his tanned shoulders, and then continued on his way. As she watched him go, she saw a small boy standing next to a pick up truck at the parking lot. He waved at her. She smiled, waved back, and then turned away.

Bonnie walked over and stood next to the four canoes lined up along the shore. The creek had grown into a river with a strong, swift current that was approaching perilous conditions. It would take a great deal of skill and effort merely to cross safely to the other side, and she began to debate whether or not it was really worth the attempt.

"Would you like a ride?"

Bonnie looked up and found herself face to face with Sparrow. She realized that she was in Tunu. She was dreaming.

"Do you know where Credit is?" she asked.

Sparrow grinned. "Are you kidding? With all this water around, he can't be far away."

She picked up a paddle and motioned towards the canoe. "Hop in."

"Is it safe?" Bonnie inquired. "What about the waterfalls?"

"We'll avoid the falls."

They entered the swift main current and rushed down stream until they came to a fork. Sparrow steered them into the left channel. They passed beneath several cement bridges in the middle of a village before shooting out into open meadow, where the current slowed to a leisurely pace. They had nearly caught up to several other canoeists when Bonnie heard the muffled sounds of a falls or rapids around the next bend.

"There's nothing to it," Sparrow reassured her. "It sounds worse than it is."

As they rounded the bend, Bonnie saw the last two canoes slipping easily over a ledge. She also noticed two people standing atop a high bank. Their posture looked familiar, and as she closed in on them she realized that it was Jason and Credit.

In her excitement, she momentarily lost her balance, throwing the canoe off course. They were dangerously close to the waterfall and about to ram the huge boulder in the middle. Both women valiantly struggled to right the boat.

Amazingly, the canoe shifted and they slipped neatly over the falls.

When Bonnie was able to search the bank again, Credit and Jason were gone.

"Credit!" she shouted.

"Stop! Stop the canoe!" she demanded.

"It wouldn't do any good," Sparrow replied as she continued on course. "They're gone and we'd never catch them now."

"What do you mean, they're gone!?! They were there only a moment ago! They couldn't have gone far."

"They've gone very far. Believe me. If fate had meant us to meet them, we would have. The timing is off, and it's not our fault. I don't think Credit even recognized us. I haven't discovered what it is yet, but something is making him stumble, something that keeps him from making the determination that he is dreaming. It is making him waste his opportunities. He is more inclined than usual to wander aimlessly around Tunu."

"He's supposed to be trying to help Teresa. You grabbed her once in a dream. Do you know where she is now? Is she still in a coma or has she woken up?"

The questions caught Sparrow by surprise. She was thrown into a long, contemplative trance.

"You might try the ruins," she finally uttered.

"The ruins? What ruins?"

Without answering, Sparrow steered the canoe to the bank and stepped out.

Frustrated, Bonnie stood up abruptly. The motion caused the canoe to lurch sideways, launching her into a backward dive-- straight into the purple mist.

24 Flipside

They hustled up the embankment to the four lane highway, paused long enough to check for traffic, and then crossed to the other side of the road.

"Let's wait here for a moment. Catch our breath," Credit huffed as he bent over and placed his hands on his knees. He scanned the highway while he rested. He was curious about the lack of traffic. He had yet to sight a car. This being the main loop around town, it was usually a very busy thoroughfare.

"Where are we going?" Jason asked, obviously unenthused about the endeavor.

Credit pointed across the pasture. "Do you see where the tree lines come together near that hill over there? That's where the creeks merge."

It was about a half mile distant.

"All of this land is posted," Jason protested. "Are you sure we should be doing this?"

"It's a shame, isn't it? Everywhere you go nowadays, it's damn private property."

It was a paradox Credit had never understood, how anyone could claim ownership of the planet, something that had preceded them by a million years and would outlive them by that much more. It was such a ludicrous proposition. If anything, the Earth owned the people. Still, that did nothing to negate the fact that some people were more than willing to shoot a person for trespassing on their private little plot.

"All the waterways in Texas are public property," he reassured his son. "We're legal if we keep to the bank. We'll cut across the pasture to the tree line and follow it down to the junction. Nobody will see us if we're quick about it."

Before his son could raise an objection, Credit lit out across the field.

Jason caught up with him at the tree line, jumped the feeder creek, and then trudged along behind his father in a silent stew.

What was driving this guy? Jason wondered. Was somebody chasing him?

Nervously, he searched the field for any sign of movement, and sure enough, soon spotted what he feared most.

"There's a boy over there," Jason anxiously whispered.

"Where?"

"Over there," Jason pointed.

Credit was unable to spot the boy until Jason pointed him out on the far side of the pasture. He was half way up the hill, digging around the tires of a truck. It was quite evident that he had become stuck in the mud.

"Are you sure that's not an old farmer?"

"Looks like a boy to me. Do you think we should go help him?"

"No, I don't. We're not supposed to be here."

Not wanting to be seen, they re-crossed the feeder creek and then quickened their pace, hopeful that the person had been too busy to notice. When they were finally out of sight of the road, their paranoia began to slacken.

"Why are we here?" Jason prodded, still not clear about their intentions.

"We're almost there," Credit evaded. The plain fact of the matter was that he could no longer remember his intentions.

"Is this it?" Jason asked when they reached the confluence of the creeks. They stood beneath a huge oak tree atop the tall bank of a swiftly running stream.

"Look at the water!" Credit exclaimed. Although it ran green in the deeper holes, the water was relatively clear, a splendid contrast to the rusty brown color of other area streams.

"So what?"

"I've never seen water this clear in East Texas."

"So what's that got to do with anything?"

They walked down an old roadway that cut through the creek bank, known locally as a scrape, and stood at the edge of the water. An old, dilapidated bridge hung precariously at their feet, creaking and groaning as it swayed in the current.

"Just look at this creek. It's beautiful!" Credit was beside himself. Just above the confluence of the two creeks was a uniform, three foot high waterfall that was divided in two by a huge boulder in the middle. Behind it, cat-tails lined the shore. Water lilies and other flowering aquatic plants formed coves along the river's edge to where it curved out of sight.

"Man, I wonder where this thing starts," he murmured. "There has to be a highway crossing somewhere where I can launch the canoe. Float it on down to the loop."

He stepped out onto the old bridge. It creaked and groaned under his weight.

"You're not planning on crossing that thing!" Jason protested. Surely this guy can't be serious, he thought. "Part of it's under the water, for christ's sakes."

He had to put his foot down. "I ain't crossing that."

Credit changed his mind when the rotting timber began to collapse beneath him.

He jumped back to the bank just in time to avoid a bath.

"People are coming down the creek," Jason observed.

Credit felt alarmed. His first impulse was to search for a hiding place, but it was already too late. The lead canoeist had come over the falls and was upon them. It was a grizzly old man with white hair and a chiseled face, apparently in very good physical condition as he effortlessly back paddled against the strong current, holding his place in front of them.

"You boys don't belong here," he scolded in a smooth, firm drawl. "This here crick is private property. I don't care if you run around in the pasture, but you stay away from this here crick now, you understand?"

He glared at them long enough to make sure that his message had penetrated, and then floated off as the other canoes began to catch up.

Credit was truly stunned. How could that be? He wondered incredulously.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Jason pleaded.

When they climbed back to the top of the bank, Credit paused to watch the rest of the canoes float past. As he admired the ease with which they negotiated the waterfalls, he noticed the last canoe turn suddenly sideways, putting itself in imminent danger of wrapping around the boulder in the middle of the falls. He readied himself to jump in and help, but the two girls miraculously righted themselves and slid safely over the ledge.

"Let's go!" Jason urged. "We've got a long ways to go to get back." He began trotting through the pasture.

Seeing no other option, Credit followed. They crossed the tree studded field until they came upon two rows of three houses each. The paved road in between them started at the creek, at a puzzlingly large harbor, and ended with the last houses. In effect, the road went nowhere.

"I thought this was all pasture land" Jason sarcastically jabbed.

"So did I, but I've been wrong before." Like all day long. "Evidently, that's where the canoe ride ends."

"I can't believe I let you bring me all this way," Jason commented after they had re-crossed the highway. They dropped down the embankment and followed the trail along the creek. Oddly enough, instead of growing larger, the creek appeared much shallower and narrower than upstream.

"Once we climb that dike ahead of us, we're almost there," Credit mentioned.

When they reached the foot of the dike, they saw an old man raking the bed of the stream. Every drop of water had disappeared as if it had been absorbed into the ground. When the old man noticed them, he stopped his work and leaned on his rake. It was the same old man who had scolded them from the canoe.

"You boys stay off this crick now, do ya hear?"

The chastisement frightened them both, and in no time they were standing next to a parked car atop the dike. The 1975 Pontiac was huge and solid, but sitting very close to the ground. Old age had taken a heavy toll on the suspension.

"How'd that get up here?" Jason asked. It was just as incongruous as seeing the old man raking the creek.

"I don't know, but he sure is a crazy son of a bitch. That ain't even four wheel drive. Hell, it's hard enough to walk up here, let alone driving."

The door suddenly slammed shut, surprising them both. The engine started, the car backed up, turned, and then headed straight down the outrageously steep embankment. And while the other side of the dike had been smooth and grassy, this side was covered with large, loose rocks and an assortment of cactus.

Expecting to see the car go tumbling end over end, they watched with growing suspense, but the Pontiac made it to the bottom with no trouble at all.

Wrong again, Credit conceded as they followed the path of the car down the dike and past the stone building that had a myriad of electrical wires running to it.

They stopped on the road that was high up overlooking a bay of the lake. He had been wrong about his assessments the entire day long, totally out of sync with the flow, and he couldn't help but feel that something of intrinsic importance was eluding him. He had previously hoped that it would be waiting for him at the creek junction, but if a clue had been there he had entirely missed it.

He closely studied his son as they proceeded to climb a pipeline that crossed the bay to the city. This was undoubtedly the most dangerous part of their journey, and yet this was where Jason appeared to be the most comfortable. He was certainly much calmer than he had been in the pasture or at the creek.

Who could figure? Credit mused. A thousand feet above the bay, balanced on a narrow pipe that was suspended from cables like a giant "V", and the kid was all cool.

Half way across the wide expanse Jason stopped, knelt down and picked up something in his hand.

"Watch this," he grinned, displaying a rock the size of his fist. He leaned over and let it drop.

It took an eternity to reach the bay, where it made an almost imperceptible ripple in the waves. In fact, if they hadn't watched the descent, they never would have seen the stone hit the water.

"Where did that stone come from?"

"They're all along this pipeline. Just open your eyes."

He picked up another rock and dropped it over the edge.

"You'd better make sure there's nothing below you," Credit warned, still wondering why there would be stones up there. "Sail boats are all over the place down there."

"I ain't gonna hit anything," Jason replied in a tired voice. A flute-like melody accompanied his words.

What am I missing? Credit was stumped.

"Where's that sound coming from?" he asked, suddenly snapping to the fact that the melody of the flute continued to linger.

"Wind whistling through the cables," Jason answered, still preoccupied with dropping stones into the bay.

It was definitely not the wind. Credit ruminated as he eased past his son. The city, once visible in the near distance below, had become blotted out by thick rain clouds that enshrouded the pipeline ahead of them. Bent on seeking out the source of the flute music, he proceeded into the fog bank.

When he once again emerged into clarity, the pipeline had disappeared. He was standing on the top edge of a vast, desert mesa. Adobe dwellings and pick-up trucks cluttered a nearby spur. The scene felt vaguely familiar.

The flute music continued its elusive, haunting melody. One moment it would waft up from the cliff side below, and the very next it would come drifting in from across the rugged mesa top, confounding any attempts to pinpoint a direction.

The familiarity of the scene finally dawned on him. He was at the Hopi village of Oraibi. He had passed through the purple mist without ever realizing it. Once again he had missed finding Metamor.

"People are starting to arrive."

What!? Who said that?

Deanna stood a short distance away. Behind her, several other people were approaching.

What the hell is she doing here? He fitfully wondered.

"Perhaps you'd better wake up now, Credit."

Wake up?

Damn!

It was too late. The scene dissolved before his eyes.

25 Mexico City

"Buckley."

"Martinez, sir. Guess who I just ran into."

"I haven't got time for games, Francis."

"Bonnie Leigh Hampton."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely. There's no way to mistake that woman. I fell in love with her the first time I laid eyes on her picture."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Downtown Mexico City."

"Any damage from the earthquake down there?"

"No. We were lucky. It leveled Acapulco. What do you want me to do about the woman?"

"Is she alone?"

"No. She's being escorted by a tall Irishman. He goes by a Spanish name, Juan Diaz de Villarrobledo. Very strange."

"Something's up, Francis. Lews flew into Mexico City yesterday. Rawlings followed him and the Logan woman to the Teotihuacan ruins just north of there. They're there right now."

"Is that right? A strange apparition appeared up there four days ago. The local mystics say it's connected with the earthquakes."

"Look, Buck. These people are into something besides drugs. Why don't we just bring them in and let another agency take over?"

"That man laid in a coma for twenty-seven days, and then he stood up and walked off without a sign of muscular atrophy. You're damn right they're into something besides drugs, and I want to know what they're up to. You got that?"

"Got it."

"You stick with the woman until she meets up with Lews, and then let Rawlings take over."

"You got it."

26 Teotihuacan

"Why are you dragging me all over the place?" she wearily demanded.

"This is only the beginning," he replied in a grim, serious tone. He knew that she was in no mood for his asinine sense of humor, but he was taking great delight in egging her on.

"We must have walked five miles already this morning," she complained. "I'm hungry and sore. I resent the fact that you made me sleep in the damn car all night, and, oh no, I'm not going to climb that pyramid!"

Credit smiled diabolically.

"We'll only go half way," he assured her as he took her hand to urge her up the steps.

Deanna was adamant and wouldn't budge.

Without forewarning, he snatched her off her feet and carried her, shrieking and loving every minute of it, to the second tier of the Pyramid of the Moon.

"I must say, you're in a much better mood now than you were in earlier," she said after he set her down.

"I didn't like you waking me up," he honestly replied.

"So I gathered. You weren't any too subtle about your feelings. It's a side of you I haven't seen before."

That's the way it goes, he thought as he smiled back at her.

"I'm concerned about the fading of the mural," she added. "It was really noticeable this morning. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know," he hedged, knowing full well that it could mean only one thing-- Teresa's life force was quickly fading. He had already wasted two of his dreams. It was obvious that he would not get many more opportunities to help her.

Something was keeping him from determining his state of awareness when he was in Tunu. Perhaps Sparrow had been right, he speculated. When he had been in his

coma, his visits to Metamor had interrupted his continuity, keeping him from remembering his name and finding the Earth. Had something harmful happened to him in the Blue World? Something that he was completely unaware of, that was still affecting his abilities?

"You know, every time you fall asleep, I expect a miracle to happen."

"And nothing happens at all," he weakly replied. And nothing would happen until he was able to once again recognize his flipside. He wondered if he had lost that ability forever.

"Credit? I'm sorry I said that."

"That's all right. I'm sorry I drifted off there. That volcano sure has been venting a lot of smoke since we've been here," he mentioned as he surveyed the surrounding scenery.

"They think it's because of the earthquake in Acapulco."

He focused his mind as he gazed down the Pathway of the Dead. "This is where I was sitting when Teresa entered my dream. It was dusk, and I was debating whether or not I had time to see the murals of the ball game before it turned dark. As I stood up, I saw two large birds fly through the plaza below. One of them appeared to be injured, but I was more interested in the murals, and I jumped to the ground."

"You're kidding!"

Credit smiled. "My thoughts, exactly. Baaaad mistake. But I was already in the air, and surprisingly enough, I touched down safely, light as a feather. One of the owls flew at me a couple of times until I followed it into the palace. I didn't know it at the time, but it was Lucheza. The wounded owl was Teresa."

At that moment an owl fluttered down beside them.

"It's Lucheza!" Deanna shrieked. "I'm positive! Then that really is Teresa, isn't it? I don't believe it! I swear that's Lucheza, though. That's him, isn't it?"

Credit pretended to be hurt. "All this time you didn't believe me, did you?"

"Forget that. You need to help Teresa. You can help her, can't you?"

Could he?

"We need to go to Arizona now," he said after a thoughtful pause. He stared absently at the puffing volcano.

"Now? Why? Can't you help her here? That volcano isn't going to erupt! I was hoping to see Mexico City. There's an awful lot to see..."

"Well, that's too fucking bad," he admonished. "You oppose every god-damned thing that I want to do. Even if that volcano doesn't entirely erupt, the ash could close down the airport. We're going to Arizona and that's all there is to it."

He had no other recourse. Since he couldn't find the gate to Metamor, and he couldn't determine his state of awareness while in Tunu, the lure of the flute was all that he had left.

28 Mexico City

Bonnie graciously thanked the lady and then stepped away from the counter. She put the newly purchased tickets inside her purse as she scanned the lobby for Camrod.

A man standing at the magazine rack caught her attention. He was neatly dressed in a suit and tie, by all appearances a young Mexican businessman. But he had a vexing, familiar face, as if she had seen him somewhere or met him before. But where? It irked her for a moment that she could not unlock her memory.

She found Camrod at the front entranceway, talking with two bellboys. Although he was no taller than they were, they both looked above his head when they spoke to him. She couldn't help but giggle. Camrod played his part with such flair!

"And does everybody see you as a seven foot tall pirate?" she asked when he joined her.

"No," he smiled. "It seems that most people here see me as an unusually tall Mexican, and it has aroused their curiosity. They are full of questions and I have been forced to come up with some amusing explanations."

She urged him to elaborate, and he mischievously grinned and said that he had just told the two bellboys that his mother was a wealthy, educated woman from the province of Valencia in Spain, while his father was a poor, Tarahumara Indian from Chihuahua. She had run away from her parents while they were visiting the city. His father was a servant for a wealthy family at the time, and he gave her a place to hide and provided her with food. It was love at first sight and they soon eloped. Although it had been a marriage of enduring love from the very beginning, the total incongruity of such a union had totally confused the gods, and so when he was born he was blessed with great height and strength.

"And then I told them that if the Aztecs had invaded Spain instead of the other way around, then all of them might be much taller people." He let out a light-hearted laugh.

Bonnie was amazed by the depth of his subterfuge. She wondered if even she had seen him as he truly is. But despite his ruses, she completely trusted Camrod and was glad that he had offered to accompany her.

"I have a cab waiting to take us to the airport," he said after he had finished laughing.

"I've decided to take a little side trip to the ruins at Teotihuacan," she said as she reached into her purse. She handed him a ticket and then took hold of his arm and led him towards the tour bus.

"Is there an ulterior reason for this trip, or are we merely acting the part of sightseers?" he inquired.

"Just a hunch, really. There may be nothing to it. I met Sparrow in my dream again last night, and when I asked about Teresa, she told me to try the ruins. I thought nothing of it until the lady at the counter mentioned a strange occurrence at Teotihuacan. Something to do with an owl. Teresa was very close to a particular owl."

"Did you see Credit in your dream?"

"I glimpsed him again but didn't get the chance to talk to him." Because the numskull had run away from her! Even though it had just been a dream, he was beginning to get on her nerves. That was twice now that he had ignored her. She was determined that the sun-of-a-bitch would only get one more chance.

"I admire your ability to remember and make sense of your dreams," Camrod complimented. "It is something I am unable to do."

"And I admire your ability to make people see you as you aren't. I'll never understand how you do that."

"It's all in the eyes of the beholder."

They arrived at their destination and proceeded to make their way through the crowd to the Temple of Quetzalpapalotl, where they squeezed in to see the mural that was not a mural. They then retired to the Plaza of the Moon.

Bonnie was very pensive after learning that the mural had appeared the same night that Teresa had gone into her coma. It made her wonder if there truly was a connection. After all, Teresa was very proud of her owl, Lucheza.

A general clamor arose from the crowd and several people pointed skyward.

"Well I'll be," Camrod stated. "An owl is flying towards that pyramid. It just landed next to those two people."

Before Bonnie could look, she caught sight of something that sent a shiver through her. The same man that she had noticed in the hotel lobby was standing not far away, trying hard not to be noticed. Her memory popped like a cork in a bottle.

He was the man who had been guarding the hut where Jason and Deanna had been held captive! She would never forget the expression he made when he lost his composure and ran. Although he now had a full set of teeth and his goofy expression was gone, she was certain that he had been one of the drug smugglers.

She pulled at Camrod's arm.

"We're being followed again," she whispered. Nervously, she singled out the culprit.

"I want to leave right now," she pleaded. "I just want to go back to the States and get this over with."

29 Chihuahua

She nervously glanced at the man on the telephone.

"He sure is keeping a close eye on us," she observed for the umpteenth time. "I thought we would have shaken him by now. He must know we know about him."

"He is persistent, isn't he? And very good. Certainly no drug smuggler."

"But I'm sure that's the man I saw guarding Jason."

"And I'm sure, too. They're still trying to make sense of what happened the night you interrupted their undercover operation."

Bonnie looked down at her watch.

"It's almost two-ten."

"Then it's time to do the unexpected." Camrod gave her a conspiratorial wink and then reassuringly placed his hand on her shoulder. "You take care of yourself, Bonnie Hampton. I'm sure you'll do just fine on your own."

Bonnie mouthed the words, "thank-you", and smiled gratefully. She would miss him. She had grown to admire Camrod in the short time they had been together.

"We'll meet again soon," he said.

"Good luck."

As he turned to confront the man on the telephone, Bonnie melted into the crowd.

30 Chihuahua

"Buckley."

"Martinez, sir."

"Don't tell me..."

"I lost the girl, sir."

"Good god, you had her in your sights not thirty minutes ago! What's with you and Taylor?"

"It was that man she was with! Who is that guy?"

"I told you already. We don't know yet."

"Right after I finished talking with you, he approached me and accused me of stealing his wallet. Made a real rhubarb out of it. Got the police involved and everything. Of course they found his wallet in my pocket. He's damn good, whoever he is. Even when I showed them my credentials, they still tended to believe him. Said he was more Mexican than I ever hoped to be! I tell you, the man's a gringo if I ever saw one! The whole episode was totally bizarre."

"Are you still tailing him?"

"He slipped away while the police were detaining me. They're both gone, and they bought tickets for all destinations. There's no telling which way they headed. The whole place here is chaotic."

"The whole world is chaotic! There's been seven catastrophic earthquakes in the past seventy-two hours and preliminary reports say Popocatepetl is ready to erupt and wipe out half of Mexico City. But that's no excuse for botching a god-damned simple assignment."

"It's not my fault! I tell you, these people are into black magic or something. I swear that she recognized me right from the beginning, and you know she's never seen me before. We need to grab them and get this over with."

"The decision is no longer mine to make. You get back to El Mano if you can. I've got Taylor waiting for Rawlings and Lews at the airport in Albuquerque. There's too much movement going on. They're up to something and we're going to find out what."

"Yes, sir."

31 Bonnie/Flipside

She came to an abrupt stop on the trail, perplexed by her sudden loss of memory.

She stared into the deep, rugged desert canyon and wondered where she was.

How did she get there? Why was she there?

A dark-skinned man ahead of her made a snorting sound and motioned for her to follow. Only then did she realize that she had been following him into the canyon for hours. His wisp-like urging had been irresistible. His very demeanor promised answers to riddles at the end of the journey, but try as she might, she had not been

able to catch him. Still, consumed by the desire to learn his secrets, she obediently resumed her hike.

After an indeterminably long period of time, she finally reached the canyon bottom. She emerged from a dark tunnel of river cane and found her guide standing next to a rope bridge that spanned a shallow but turbulent river. As she meekly approached the thin figure, she noted that he was a native American, unkempt and wild. And although his face was without expression, his eyes held the sparkle for life that reminded her of Camrod.

When she arrived at his side, he somberly stared at the bridge for a moment before pointing across the swirling river to a downstream cave. Without uttering a sound, he then turned and sprinted back up the trail.

Bonnie stared uncertainly at the downstream cave, and then courageously crossed the fragile rope bridge and approached the opening. Once inside, she noticed Mark sullenly sitting in the shadows. He looked up at her without acknowledgment.

"Where's Deanna?" she asked.

"Where do you think?" he responded bitterly.

Before she could answer, Sparrow stepped out of the shadows. Very swiftly, Bonnie accepted the fact that she was dreaming. She was in Tunu!

"I'm glad you finally arrived," Sparrow said. "Credit ought to be here any minute now. There is something I need to tell him."

"You and me both. Will I actually get to talk to him this time?" she sarcastically inquired.

"I hope so. I also hope you won't be too disappointed. His behavior is becoming more and more erratic, and it is not just because of his ill-humor. It goes deeper, a malignancy that's spreading.

"I didn't know about Teresa until you mentioned her to me, and so I went to Qattarah. The old men confirmed my suspicion that Credit had been to Metamor, but they also insisted that it is not the current reason for his confusion. Whatever afflicts him is connected to Teresa, although they wouldn't tell me what happened. They said his actions are part of a larger scheme, and would tell me no more than that. They can be stubborn as hell when they want to be. And I can't discern the cause from Credit's memories because they have been shut off to me."

"I've been to Metamor, although not by my own free will," Bonnie said.

"I know. And your aura is not scrambled. Your memories are intact. Look! Here he comes."

Bonnie saw two people approach, silhouetted in the far end of the cave.

Nervousness began to fester inside of her.

"Who's that with him?" she asked, concerned that it was Deanna.

"That's his friend, David," Sparrow replied. "Remember now, Credit is not quite himself, so don't be too discouraged by his actions. We all know how stubborn he can be."

Since Credit was within speaking distance, Bonnie let the remark slide. When the light hit Credit's face, she noticed his look of annoyance.

"It's about time you got here," she lightly remarked.

"The weather's pretty nasty out there," he replied dryly.

"I was beginning to think I'd never see you again," she said, disregarding his lame excuse. Despite Sparrow's warning, she felt inwardly hurt by his cold reception. She stepped forward out of the shadow.

"We had a long way to come," he said, keeping his distance. "You know that."

She felt crushed by his aloofness, his indifference. Why was he so confrontational? She wondered. He seemed so angry. Had the coma so drastically changed him? Or was it something else? Did he no longer want her in his life?

Credit noticed Mark sitting quietly in the shadows. He acknowledged him with a tip of his head, but said nothing.

"I'm glad you finally awoke from your coma," she said, breaking the silence. "I hope that never happens again."

"I can wake up anytime," he callously remarked.

A tear formed in Bonnie's eye.

"I've got to go," she stuttered. "I think Sparrow has something to say to you."

Sparrow stepped from the shadows and greeted Credit.

When Bonnie noted his look of surprise at seeing her, she felt even more unwanted. Desiring only to be alone, she quickly walked the length of the tunnel.

When the purple mist appeared, she entered it with relish.

32 Flipside

He walked the river bank with mixed emotions. Although he had escaped the hubbub and clutter of the city, he had not been able to escape the artificial surroundings. Across the wide river there arose a skyline of glittering skyscrapers. Behind him, elevated ramps of a cloverleaf spiraled between a spattering of high rise tenements. Even the river bank was no longer natural, but was made of fresh fill dirt and crushed concrete from torn up highways and demolished buildings.

He spied a particularly irritating slab of cement that was close to the bank and decided to flip it into the water. Disregarding the fact that it weighed literally thousands of pounds, he vainly struggled to lift it.

"What are you doing?"

Startled, Credit whipped around.

"I'm gonna tip this ugly thing into the water," he replied with a smile, relieved that it was David and not some stranger who had caught him in his act of delinquency.

It didn't take David long to assess the situation, and he shook his head negatively.

"You'll never do it," he said. It was plain common sense. The steel-reinforced slab of cement was much too heavy.

"Give me a hand, and this thing will be history," Credit insisted.

Both to prove his own point and to humor his friend, David joined in.

Relentlessly, they struggled to lift the slab, but to no avail. The concrete wouldn't budge. Finally over-exerted and out of breath, they stepped back to rest.

Although disappointed, Credit was still determined. He knew that there had to be a way.

"If we were in the water," he reasoned out loud, "that thing wouldn't weigh nearly as much. Let's give it another try."

Without another thought, he leapt into the river.

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way!" David laughed. He was always surprised at the lengths Credit would go to embellish his sense of humor.

Credit stood waist deep in the murky channel, concerned that he hadn't stopped to think before he had jumped. The current was much swifter than it appeared from the bank, and the water could have been over his head.

But he saw the cement slab much differently from his new perspective. There were luminescent fibers or lines emanating from its center, and those lines connected it with everything else in sight.

He moved his hand over the slab in an attempt to sever the lines, but instead found them to be elastic. Instinctively, he wrapped them around his arm, grabbed another bunch with his left hand, and yanked. The cement slab jumped into the river.

Just as quickly, Credit leapt from the water to the bank.

"That wasn't very smart!" he nervously shouted.

"What?" David was too amazed to make any other response.

"Dropping that thing in the water upstream from me was pretty dumb. The force of the current almost shoved it against me and crushed my legs."

Before David could comment, the current suddenly stopped flowing. The cement slab lay exposed on the bottom of the drained channel.

Mystified, Credit snatched the map from his back pocket.

"Here we are," he said, pointing at the page. "There's an island right there." He pointed upstream to a long, low island that he had not previously noticed. "It runs a good distance along the shore line, creating a separate canal. They must have cut the flow off from up there."

Ignoring the fact that his statement about the water made no sense, Credit continued to study the map. "This shows real good detail of Charleston. Look. Old Town is right there. There's the river going into the bay, and here's the new sections of the city."

"But this isn't Charleston," David corrected. "I think you're confused."

Credit paid no attention to him as he folded his map and put it back into his pocket. "Let's go see what stopped the water."

They walked up stream until they came upon a construction site that contained the rudiments of a lock system. Above the gates, a bridge spanned the canal, linking run-down tenement housing on both sides. On the sidewalk of the bridge, a bag lady struggled with her grocery sacks, giving Credit an odd sensation of familiarity.

"Let's help her with those sacks," he suggested. "It will be our good deed for the day."

At first, the old lady was suspicious of their intentions, but eventually she relented and accepted their offer of help. Once inside her cramped kitchen, she turned on the radio and invited them to sit and visit while she put away her groceries.

"What are you boys doing down here in the ghetto this afternoon? Shouldn't you be at work? Or are you rich?"

"No, we're not rich," they snickered in unison.

"Well, you should be. All white boys should be rich."

"I wish it was that easy," David said, shaking his head, thinking that the old woman probably had a mattress full of money stashed away.

"Why not? It's a white man's world," she retorted, stressing the word "man".

"You have every advantage there is," she continued. "And life is nothing without money. It gets you everything. If you're a white male and not rich, you must be lazy or stupid," she sarcastically added.

Credit pointed to David. "He's a banker, and he ain't rich."

The old lady's eyes widened perceptibly, impressed that a man of his stature had helped carry her groceries. She stared at him for validation.

"I'd say that I'm well off, but not rich. No."

"I'm a writer. I'm supposed to be poor," Credit quipped.

"Don't let him fool you," David warned. "He's discovered something that money could never buy. After what I've just witnessed, I'm finally beginning to understand."

"Understand what?" the bag lady inquired, skeptical that anything besides money could make one rich.

"There's more to life than we normally tend to think," Credit commented, distracted by the flute music coming over the radio.

"Don't let him feed you a bunch of garble!" David exclaimed. "I've listened to that crap for years now, and it only tends to confuse you."

"It's not crap," Credit contended. "If you peel away the layers of nonsense that society has heaped upon you, the world looks different. Anybody can do it."

"But we're not talking about philosophy. Listen to me," David enunciated as he stared at the bag lady. "With my own eyes, I saw him move a boulder that easily weighed more than a ton. Probably more than two tons! An impossible task, and yet he lifted it like it weighed nothing at all. He absolutely defied the laws of gravity!" He threw his arms into the air for emphasis.

"It doesn't weigh as much in the water," Credit admitted.

"It wasn't in the water! I tell you, he picked up a two ton block of cement from off the river bank and tossed it into the water!"

"How do you explain that?" the woman demanded.

"I pulled the proper strings," Credit mumbled, still more interested in the flute music.

David and the woman stared at him, silently demanding an explanation. The bag lady finally lost patience.

"If you can perform feats like that," she said, "then what are you doing here? You could make yourself a fortune."

"You're missing the point!" David cried. "He learned how to do this because he has no interest in money or the social order."

"I'm poor and I haven't learned anything of that sort," she replied.

"That's because your desire is to be rich. As to what he's doing here," David continued, giving Credit a meaningful glance, "for some unknown reason he feels that he should be spending time with me, when actually he has more important matters to attend to. Even I can see that."

The statement drew Credit's ire.

"All right, smarty pants, tell me," he challenged. "What important matters?"

"I don't know. You never have said. But you insist that this is Charleston when it's not. I know you. There's something eating at your mind. Where's Bonnie, by the way? I thought I was supposed to meet her."

"I don't believe either one of you," the old lady interrupted. "I want to see him do something."

Credit stood up abruptly. The situation was beginning to irritate him and he felt like he had to get away.

"You want to see me do something?" he challenged in a rude tone. "Then watch me disappear."

He opened the apartment door and stepped outside. When he slammed the door shut he was standing in a cold, drizzling rain. A well worn path slithered away through the drooping, green branches of a water-logged forest.

David pulled up behind him and stepped out of his car.

"Is this it?" he optimistically asked.

"Yeah." Credit shivered. "Unfortunately, the most scenic spot is four miles up the trail, and to tell you the truth, I'm really not too enthused about hiking through the rain. It's up to you if you want to walk in there."

Although it wasn't terribly cold, the rain and gusting wind had made it decidedly uncomfortable. And they had made no preparations for rain. No rain gear, no change of clothing. The weather just hadn't cooperated. Yet, if David insisted...

"Is that where Bonnie is?"

"No," Credit curtly replied, wondering why it mattered. They had come all this way to see the Caney Creek Wilderness. Why would David be interested in Bonnie? Was there something going on between them?

"She's back at the cave," he said.

"At least she's in a dry place. Why don't we go there?"

"Why not." It was better than standing around in the rain. Besides, it was an interesting cave. He could take David spelunking.

The gravel road they traveled soon turned into pavement, but the incessant rain had turned into an intense, blustery downpour, and they came upon a section of road that had been washed away.

"This rain is becoming depressing," Credit muttered as they waited for oncoming traffic to pass. He watched the water swirling next to the road as he fiddled with the radio. He was growing tired of hearing nothing but flute music.

The next thing he knew, they were inside the cave. He was holding a flashlight in his hand, shining it down a long side tunnel.

"I've already explored down there," Credit said to David. "It's an intricate cavern with several side passages, some of them spectacular. I haven't been straight ahead yet, but it looks like the main tunnel. What do you say we check it out?"

As they made their way through the passage, Credit soon saw a light at the end of the tunnel and he turned off his flashlight. It became obvious that the light was another opening to the outside.

As they got closer he noticed a woman standing in the shadows.

"It's about time you got here," she said as they approached the opening.

"The weather's pretty nasty out there," he commented.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she said.

The woman stepped forward, enabling the outside light to strike her face. Credit saw that it was Bonnie.

Geez, he thought, first David, and now Bonnie's getting on his case. He wondered if it was a conspiracy.

"We had a long way to come," he retorted. "You know that."

He noticed Mark sitting on a rock against the wall. He looked bored and sullen as he stared back at him in silence. Another figure moved in the shadows and Credit assumed that it was Deanna, although he didn't make the effort to confirm his suspicion.

"I'm glad that you finally awoke from your coma. I hope that never happens again," Bonnie whispered.

"I can wake up anytime," he callously remarked.

Bonnie diverted her gaze. "I've got to go," she stuttered. "I think Sparrow has something to say to you."

Sparrow? What the Hell was she doing there? Confused and shaken, he saw Sparrow step into the middle of the cave entrance.

"Come over here and look outside," she demanded. "Tell me what you see."

He didn't have to look. He could hear the running water. "That drains into the Cossatot River," he automatically responded. It was the only logical conclusion.

"Not even close."

Shit. Grudgingly, he made his way to the opening and stepped outside. Below them, behind a wall of cane, a river ran gingerly between two fairly steep gravel banks. Desert succulents clung to nooks and crannies. Approximately two hundred feet up stream a rope bridge spanned a narrow gorge.

"I've never been here before," he gruffly admitted. "And it sure isn't where I'll find the flute player."

"What flute player?" Sparrow asked.

"The mahu."

"Don't be ridiculous. This is Medusal Canyon."

"So what?"

Sparrow stared at him sympathetically.

"Perhaps you need to visit the room of healing once again."

Credit felt uneasy. He looked around at the downstream side of the river and noticed a boy standing fifty yards away. The boy politely waved at Credit and Sparrow.

"Who is that?" Credit asked Sparrow. The manner in which the boy waved had unleashed a memory. He had seen him before. At least twice. Once in the field near the stream where a truck was stuck in the mud; the other time as an ominous, solitary figure who beckoned to him from the Plains of Metamor.

"I don't know who he is," Sparrow answered. "I've never seen him before. Why don't you go find out?"

"He's been following me around. He scares me," Credit admitted.

"Scares you?! He's just a little boy! What a pussy you've become.

"Look, there is a shadow inside you that I cannot penetrate," she said. "It has made it hard for me to locate you when you enter Tunu, and when I do find you, it's always too late. You're already tired and cranky."

"You give me this same damn spiel every time I see you," Credit complained. "Is there a point to all this?"

"You've lost all the gains you had made prior to your coma. I suggest you re-examine all your trips to the past. Your malady does not stem from Metamor."

"There ain't nothing wrong with me. I remember everything perfectly well."

"What about Teresa?"

"What about her?"

"Do you know where she is? Can you help her?"

"Can you?"

"What happened to her?"

"I haven't got the slightest idea," he snapped. "I need to return to Metamor to learn the Mysteries, but since the time that you pushed me, I haven't been able to so much as glimpse the god-damned purple mist!"

"If I hadn't pushed you, you'd still be wandering around Tunu looking for Texas."

"So?"

"So, you don't need the purple mist. It is dangerous to you now. There is a place on Tunu where you can get back and forth to the Earth without ever going through the purple mist. You know where that is."

"Why would I want to do that?"

She stared back, wide-eyed. "This is all a dream," she calmly replied. "Bonnie and I are just trying to help, and all you want to do is insult us."

A dream? Well, why the hell didn't they just say so to begin with?

"So, Bonnie got hold of some more magic powder, huh?"

"She doesn't need the powder anymore. All she needs is for you to regain your senses." Sparrow looked down the canyon. "Why don't you face your fears and go meet that boy down there? Maybe he's here to help you."

And maybe he's not, Credit thought, but it was a good excuse to get away from Sparrow. He was tired of her crap. He gave her a dirty look and then slid down the rocks to the edge of the stream. The water was crystal clear and gurgling like there had been no rain whatsoever that day. The boy stood waiting on the other side of the brook. He crossed over without ever getting wet.

"Thank-you for meeting with me, sir," he said. "My name is Paul Hanaver. I've been trying to catch up with you."

"Credit Lews. Why are you following me?"

“Because you know the way, sir,” he answered cryptically.

“Was that you I saw back in the field?”

“Yes, sir. I was hoping to meet with you, but my truck got stuck in the mud. You were with your son. I guess you weren’t ready to meet me yet.”

“And on the Plains of Metamor?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve been there.”

“Is that where you are from?”

“No, sir. I’m from the Earth, just like you and Bonnie.”

Bonnie! Damn! He realized that he had made a mess of things with Bonnie and he knew he had to find her again and apologize. It was obvious that she had stepped out of Tunu and gone back to Earth. But where on Earth would he find her?

“I hate to be rude to you, sir, but we really have no time for small talk. There is something that I would like to show you.”

Paul touched Credit on the arm and they began to rise into the air. Before rising out of the canyon into a thick, swirling cloud, Credit noticed a sign next to a set of railroad tracks.

"Divisadero."

The next moment they were standing beneath a shallow rock overhang high above a wide, desert plain. The sun was a huge red ball sitting on the horizon. Blue, horizontal clouds flanked both sides. Credit wondered if the sun was rising or setting.

“Is this Tunu or the Earth?” he asked.

“We are on Earth.”

The boy had picked up a stiff leather pouch that had a small variety of colored paint on it. He was touching up figures that had been painted on the rock wall. Credit recognized several Indian symbols along with both animal and human figures.

“These pictographs look like ancient shaman figures,” Credit said as he pointed out three elongated figures clustered together. They appeared to glow on the wall as if they had a shine of their own.

“Shaman figures, yes. But not so ancient, as you can see.” Paul smiled. “This is my story. I work on it when I can.”

“This is you,” the boy said as he pointed out the tallest figure. “This is Bonnie, and the shortest one is your son, Jason.”

Credit was taken aback. He stared absently at the three figures. He may have been the tallest, but Bonnie glowed with a brilliance that dwarfed himself and Jason.

“Why do you say those figures are us?” Credit asked.

“Because the three of you are part of my story,” Paul answered matter-of-factly.

“Right now, your glow should be ten times what it is. It is growing dimmer. And what is masking your light is what is holding you back. There really is no time for you to be wandering around in the dark.”

“And what is masking my light?”

“Only you can answer that, sir. And time is growing short. I cannot emphasize that point enough.”

Credit turned away and sat down on the rocks. He stared at the rising sun.

Everyone said the same thing about him. There was something wrong with him.

“Something wrong, something wrong.” He was tired of hearing that phrase.

He closed his eyes, and was gone.

33 Albuquerque

"Did you have a good nap?"

"No," he replied bitterly. "More like a damn nightmare. And I wish you'd quit waking me up. What the hell's wrong with you, anyway?"

"My, my, we're touchy. Did we wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"Just get off my back, will ya?" he snapped. "And quit patronizing me." Damn, he thought, now even Deanna sounded like Sparrow. Well, fuck Bonnie and Sparrow! Why the hell didn't they just tell him what was wrong with him instead

of beating around the bush? Why did they have to be so damn cute? What else were they keeping from him?

Deanna fumed uncomfortably.

"I'm trying to be patient, Credit," she said after she had regained her composure.

"I'm well aware that you just woke up from a coma a few days ago, but so far you've either been pukingly nice to me, or you've given me the silent treatment, or you've acted like a total asshole. Like right now. I'm getting sick and tired of your damn mood swings."

He took a deep breath. "I don't know what's wrong," he said when his anger began to recede.

"Look, if you really don't want me along..." She let her voice trail off.

"I'm tired of the whole god-damned mess," he said. "I'm afraid that if I don't find what I'm looking for in Arizona, I'm not going to be able to help Teresa. And the chances of that happening don't look promising."

Deanna ignored him. What she really understood was that Credit was not going to explain anything at all to her, and she returned to staring silently out the window.

Credit stared down at her legs. They looked so smooth and appealing, and he felt the urge to touch them. And more. And why shouldn't he? He asked himself. Hell, Mark already suspected him of stealing his wife, and Bonnie should have never

gone off to New Orleans. He didn't believe for one moment that she was really in Urique. Fuck her, he thought. Fuck them all!

He put his hand on Deanna's leg and began inching it upward.

"What the Hell are you doing?" she shrieked in a lowered tone of voice. She grabbed his hand and threw it back in his own lap. "If you're going to make a scene here on the plane, I'll just get up and switch seats with someone. I've about had it with you!"

Credit fumed, but continued to stare at her legs.

"I think we're being followed."

"What?" He lifted his eyes from Deanna's lap.

"I think we're being followed by the DEA. A man back there has been on all the same flights as us. I even saw him at the ruins."

"That's silly. Why would the DEA be following us? Surely they don't think we were in on that drug smuggling operation?"

"It couldn't possibly be because you miraculously healed yourself, could it?" she answered facetiously. "Or that you rescued us by scaring the smugglers half way to Hell?"

Credit showed a weak smile. "You think?"

She nodded her head as if there was no doubt.

"You've frightened everybody, Credit. Teresa compared it to an out of body experience. I'm sure the government is quite interested."

"The government follows the road of ideology. They don't want people to see the truth because then they lose control over them. Which one is it?" he asked.

Deanna pointed out the suspect.

"I guess it's something to be concerned about," he said after taking a peak. "But I'm more curious about where you got that dress. I didn't know you brought clothes with you?"

"I bought some at the airport. I changed while you were asleep. You obviously like it."

"Are you kidding? I'll tell you what; you sure lost weight in all the right places. If you weren't married, you'd be making me nervous."

"I think I'm making you nervous, regardless."

"We're about to land. Please fasten your seatbelts," the stewardess interrupted with a pleasant smile.

"I'm sorry about before," Credit said. "I guess I can't promise anything, and I'll understand if you want to go home, but I'd really appreciate it if you'd help me drive to Oraibi."

Deanna turned her head and looked out the window.

34 Divisadero

The locomotive wheezed and shuddered, and then heaved one final sigh, relieved that its arduous climb up the eastern face of the Sierra Madre was at an end. From there to Los Mochis would be mostly all down hill.

Bonnie disembarked with the handful of tourists but then quickly separated herself from the group. She skirted the Hotel Divisadero and made her way to the rim of the Barranca de Urique, one of the seven river canyons that were collectively known as Copper Canyon. Credit had once promised her that they

would take this trip together, she reflected. Now she was no longer certain that he wanted to take her anywhere.

The dream she had on the train had left her downcast and sullen. Three times now she had seen Credit in Tunu. Twice he had ignored her, and the last time he had been distant and aloof, his actions cold and calculated. Even if he did have an affliction, as Sparrow contended, he still had no reason to treat her with such disrespect.

When she emerged from the pines, the view that opened up in front of her was stupendous. She saw that Credit's descriptions of the canyon were entirely inadequate. Although not as colorful as the Grand Canyon, the cactus covered gorge was much deeper and every bit as grand.

Other tourists had gathered for the view. While Bonnie was quite sure that Camrod's ruse had worked and she was no longer being followed, his assertions about the government had frightened her, making her suspicious of everybody. She located the mule trail that descended into the canyon and kept on walking. While the sign indicated twelve kilometers to the bottom, she had no intention of going the distance. She wanted only to be alone.

The plan had been for her to spend the night at the Hotel while Camrod made arrangements for her to cross the border in secrecy. While his shape changing abilities would enable him to cross unnoticed, she would have certainly been recognized.

Lost in self doubt, but spurred on by the shifting panorama, she continued to descend the twisting desert trail. When she turned a sharp, blind bend above a sheer drop, she found herself face to face with a dark, thin man; a Tarahumara Indian. For an instant her heart stopped.

Like the man in her dream, he was unkempt and wild looking, but with a glint in his eye that reminded her of Camrod. He was not threatening in any manner and she felt utterly safe with him. When he beckoned her to follow, she could not resist.

He led her at a rapid pace down a side trail that descended ever lower into the gorge. She noticed as the vegetation began to take on a more tropical look, the plants becoming denser and lusher. The path took them through a beautiful, spring-fed area and then past huts with well tended patches of corn and small orchards of lemon, lime, and fig.

The sound of the river grew from a distant murmur, indistinguishable from the wind, into a dominant roar. When she emerged from a lush growth of bamboo that hugged the high walls, she found herself next to the water. A flimsy rope bridge spanned the river.

Her eyes immediately went down stream to where she expected to find a cave. A thick patch of cane and willow obstructed her actual view, but she could tell that there was a place where over the centuries the river had undercut the wall. Her

native guide pointed across the river and then disappeared back up the trail, leaving her alone.

Trembling at the prospect of finding Credit, Bonnie carefully crossed the rickety bridge and followed the beaten trail that led through the bush. It ended where the rock wall met the river. She was shocked and dismayed to discover that there was no cave there, but only a shallow depression in the wall barely deep enough to keep one sheltered from the rain. She turned in irritation and marched back to the rope bridge.

The dark shadows creeping high up the side of the gorge reminded her that it was late in the afternoon, leaving her with no time to walk out of the canyon before nightfall. And without a guide she had no confidence in her ability to remember the trail. Recognizing that her situation was hopeless, she numbly resigned herself to sleeping in the shallow cave for the night. She would attempt to find her way out in the morning. Hopefully, she would make it in time to catch the train back to Presidio.

As she returned to the shallow undercut, she heard the notes of a simple reed flute dancing above the sound of the river. Moments later her guide arrived with a blanket and, more importantly, fruit and pinole for her dinner, with fresh spring water in gourds. She very graciously accepted the gift, relieved that she would not have to drink the murky river water.

As she ate, he diligently gathered wood for a fire and then boughs of leaves which he tied together for a pillow. When finished, and without ever uttering a word, he waved good-bye and then trotted back up the trail, deftly crossing the bridge on the run. Soon afterward, she heard the soothing melody of his solitary flute echoing down through the canyon, harmonizing with the notes of the river.

Amazingly calm and unnerved by her situation, Bonnie slowly fed the fire as she listened to the sounds of the night; the crickets and locusts, and the occasional hoot of an owl. The comforting sound of the reed flute continued to masterfully blend with the flow of the rushing water.

Only when her fuel supply became entirely exhausted did she finally give way to sleep.

35 Bonnie/Flipside

"What'll it be, ma'am?" the clerk inquired in a polite voice.

The question broke her trance, startling her. Why was she there? For the life of her, she couldn't remember.

"Marlboro Lights, please," she improvised. The cigarettes would be a gift for Credit. Since he insisted on smoking the damn things, it would serve him right if he died.

She completed the transaction and then stepped outside to the sidewalk. She scrutinized the house across the street; a large, white, two-story Victorian home. Instinct told her that she would find Credit there. Would he be angry with her again if she intruded? More than likely, she answered herself. He had been so distant and abrasive lately, she no longer knew what to expect. She only knew that she needed to see him.

Putting aside her fear of rejection, she crossed the street and climbed the porch steps. The front door was wide open, and the din of conversation suggested the presence of several people, but because of the darkness inside, she was unable to focus on the features of the room. She knocked lightly on the door frame.

"I knew you'd do it!" came a surprised, familiar voice. "Come in and join us."

As Bonnie entered the living room she became aware that she had developed an acute dose of tunnel vision. Although she was certain that there were more people present, she noticed only Sparrow.

"Is Credit here?" she pointedly asked.

"No. But I think we'll be able to find him early enough this time," Sparrow answered.

"You're hiding something," Bonnie accused. "I want to know where he is."

"He's in Ganado," came an unfamiliar voice.

Sparrow perked up. She turned towards the voice as if she wanted to hear more.

Bonnie turned her head and saw three men sitting on the sofa. They wore serapes with huge sombreros tilted low on their heads, and so she could not make out their faces.

"Or Keems Canyon," the second man countered.

"He's very hard to keep up with," the third one muttered. "If you ask me, I would say he's already in Oraibi."

"He comes and goes so very much."

"Yes. He's always on the go."

"He likes to take the long road."

Each one of the old men sighed comically.

Sparrow seemed uncharacteristically shocked by their assertions. "Why would he go to Oraibi?" she irritably asked the men. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"He goes where he will."

"We have told you, he is part of a bigger scheme."

"He spars with an ancient, insidious force."

"If he loses..."

"...he could become the most hated, contentious man of our time."

"Of all time."

"The scourge of two worlds."

Bonnie gazed stupidly at the three men, wondering if she should take them seriously. They appeared so sad and pitiful. And so very out of place.

"This is Ramon, Rueben, and Raphael," Sparrow said after collecting her thoughts. "Rarely do they leave Qattarah. They have made an exception by coming to visit me."

"We have told you..."

"...we are not here to see you."

"We have come for the red-haired one."

"The truth is..."

"..it is our fault that the Curandera is in the predicament that she's in."

"We interfered where we shouldn't have."

"And now she is the only one who can set things straight."

All three men pointed at Bonnie.

"Wrong!" Bonnie shouted with disgust. "Credit is the only one who can set things straight! The sun-of-a-bee ignored me the last three times I've seen him, and I don't like it one bit. In fact, I've had it!"

"Forget about that for now," Sparrow urged. "You both have more important matters to attend to. Like helping Teresa. The men from Qattarah have come here because it is important that we get to Credit early in his dream. If anyone can find him in time, it is them."

Still seething, Bonnie tested the old men. "Tell me what is wrong with him," she demanded. "Will he win or lose this fight of his? I need to know. Will he get better?"

All three men stared straight ahead.

"There is only one thing that is known for certain," Raphael whispered after a long pause.

"He's missing a good chance to get laid again!" Rueben snickered.

"You bet! He's going to blow it again!"

The three men sat there and giggled out of control.

"What...what do you mean?" Bonnie stuttered. It was just as she had feared.

Credit had found someone else. Deanna, no doubt.

"You dirty old men cut it out!" Sparrow admonished. She comfortingly turned to Bonnie. "Sometimes those old farts are more trouble than they're worth. You're the only one Credit is in love with."

"You know how impossible he can be," a new voice offered.

Bonnie was shocked. That was Jason! What was he doing there?

"You know he's going to lead you all over the place until he finally gets to where he's going. Physically and emotionally," Jason added with a wink.

"But he's the only one who can get you there," another new voice added.

Bonnie turned her head once more and recognized David. Behind David, sitting on a beanie bag in the corner of the room, was a small boy. He looked vaguely familiar. He simply smiled at her and waved.

"Basically, Dad's on the right path," Jason explained.

"His goal is to learn the Mysteries," David agreed. "But he lacks confidence in that road because so few others choose to walk that path. He becomes sidetracked too easily. He needs you to remind him about his objective. Only then will his direction begin to narrow."

"Don't give up on him, whatever you do," Sparrow said. "Only you can set his wandering straight. Especially with him in his present condition."

The conversation faded from Bonnie's mind as her focus shifted. From the moment she had entered the house, she had assumed that she was dreaming, that she was in Tunu. But if that was really true, then what were Jason and David, a friend of Credit's who she had never before met, doing there? Was it really them? Were they capable of dreaming in the same manner?

Sparrow seemed to intuit Bonnie's predicament.

"Jason is here, but David is your construct, your method of tapping your own inner wisdom. Regardless, you must accept them as being real. Just as you must accept me as being real. Don't get caught in the same trap that Credit fell into. I still think he doesn't accept you as being real when he sees you in his dream."

"Listen..." Rueben cupped his ear, his hand on the outside of his headdress.

"He has arrived in Tunu," Raphael announced.

"Soon now, Sparrow can take you to Credit," Ramon said to Bonnie.

"And tomorrow Credit will come to you." Rueben gave her a wink.

"We believe that you can change his luck."

All three men smiled pleasantly at her.

"And then you will have plenty of time together."

"Eternity."

"So don't be mad at him."

"Listen instead for the sound of the flute."

"A magical flute."

"The gray flute."

Sparrow glanced at the old men with a mixture of surprise and sudden comprehension. Perhaps Credit knew what he was doing after all, she thought.

Completely confused and flustered by the proceedings, Bonnie shouted in frustration. "I don't have the slightest idea what any of you are talking about."

"Then perhaps we'd better send you back to school."

"Yes," Sparrow agreed with a mischievous smile. "There are some college girls I'd like you to meet. Maybe they can help you break the ice with Credit." And then she grabbed hold of Bonnie's arm and led her through a door.

"I'm sorry that I dozed off."

Deanna yawned again as she straightened up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"That's all right. It felt good to have a warm body next to me," Credit answered from the driver's seat. An invitingly soft, warm body, at that.

"Are we getting close yet?"

"As a matter of fact, we're almost there," he said as he pointed out the road sign.

He slowed the car and turned onto the gravel road that led to the top of Third Mesa.

“According to the map,” Deanna said, “the main highway leads to the top of the mesa and goes right by Oraibi.”

“I want to take the back way.”

"We're not going to spend the night here, are we?"

"That's the plan," he replied as he carefully checked the rear view mirrors. "Our government friends are still behind us. Maybe they won't follow us up this way into the village."

"You promised me a motel room," she pouted. "I can't even stand myself any more. I need a shower. And you could use one, too."

"Look, I don't feel like arguing about it right now. This is something that I've got to do. We'll get you a damn motel room in the morning."

"Oh god," Deanna moaned. "Don't take that tone with me again. I can't stand that, Credit."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled as he rolled down the window. Why was he so irritable? So quick to anger? He would surely alienate everybody if he continued to act this way. He sure as shit would never get into Deanna's pants.

As he continued to brood, his attention was slowly drawn to a sound from outside the car. Subtly intermixed with the chirping of crickets and the creaks from the car came the intriguing melody of a flute, and for the first time Credit felt that he had made the right decision in coming to Oraibi.

"Do you hear that flute?" he asked, hoping for confirmation.

"I don't hear anything but the car and the crickets," she answered in a nervous tone. She was spooked by the utter darkness of the night. "Are you sure we should be doing this? It's already past midnight. I hope we don't get shot for trespassing."

"I hope not," Credit agreed as they reached the top of the mesa. He parked the car next to a pick-up truck and turned off the headlights. The sprightly melody of the flute had become broken by the sporadic gusts of wind that were blowing on the mesa top.

"Are we going to sleep in the car again?"

"You can cuddle up next to me like you were before," he suggested. "I thought that was rather nice."

Before she could decide whether he was serious or not, Credit grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and kissed her fully on the lips. She resisted for only a moment before returning his passion.

"What do you want?"

The voice was soft, firm and to the point. Credit let go his embrace and opened the door. He stepped outside and found himself confronted by a bare-chested, teen-age boy. Thirty feet behind him, an old man stood in a dimly lit doorway.

"I'm looking for a friend," Credit stuttered. "Her name is Sparrow. Sparrow of the Broken Ledge."

He regretted his words the moment they were out of his mouth. Why had he lied?

"I know of no Sparrow of the Broken Ledge," the boy answered. "You must be mistaken."

"I'm sorry. I lied," Credit said as he attempted to gather his wits. "It is the flute playing that brings me." He indicated the heart of the mesa with a motion of his arm.

"What flute playing? I don't hear any flute," the boy sneered, suddenly very suspicious.

"Surely you hear it. It is coming from somewhere out there. Listen through the wind."

"I hear no music," the boy sternly repeated.

But the mention of the flute playing had sparked the old man's interest and beckoned his approach. Thankful for the respite, Credit patiently waited as the old man limped towards them.

"You say the flute playing comes from out on the mesa?" he inquired of Credit when he came near.

"Stay out of this grandpa! They must leave here. This is Hopi land. It is sacred ground."

"This matter interests me, Johnny," the man responded as he carefully scrutinized Credit's face.

"My name is 'In Time To Plant The Corn!'" the boy corrected.

The old man ignored the boy's protests.

"Who do you think is playing this flute?" he inquired of Credit.

"It is the mahu. The flute player."

"Kokopelli?" Johnny spat.

"I don't know his name," Credit replied. "I never asked and he never told me. He is a humpback flute player, a mahu. That is all I know."

"You never asked!? You mock us! Leave!" the young man angrily shouted.

"Quiet!" his grandfather ordered in their own language.

Although he silently fumed, Johnny obeyed.

"Who is this woman you mentioned, this Sparrow of the Broken Ledge?"

"A woman I met in my dreams," Credit answered. "Originally, she was from Oraibi."

The old man gave a thoughtful nod and then turned to Deanna, still sitting inconspicuously in the car. "And do you also hear the song of the flute player?" he asked.

Deanna quickly glanced at Credit before looking the old man in the eyes. "No," she truthfully answered.

"Then let the man walk out on the mesa," the old man announced without hesitation. "The woman must stay here."

Johnny glared at all of them before angrily returning to the house.

Deanna questioningly looked at Credit.

Realizing that the old man's word was final and no amount of talking would change the conditions that had been set, Credit shrugged his shoulders, gave her a wink and, without uttering a word, turned and trotted off. The old man had given him the perfect excuse to leave Deanna behind.

Deanna was stunned.

"That flute playing has been driving me crazy for the past three days now," the old man admitted as he offered her his arm. "I was beginning to think that I was hearing things."

*

Credit stood at the mesa rim and wistfully gazed into the desert below. Two lonely lights glowed in the vast distance, magnifying the melancholy that had overtaken him. His time consuming search had been fruitless. Because of the gusting, darting wind, he had been unable to pinpoint the source of the music, and now he no longer even heard it.

He shivered as a cold wind crawled up his back.

Deciding to seek shelter from the blustery gale, he stepped over the side of the rim and carefully made his way to a ledge twenty feet below. He selected a snug place between two boulders and sat down to rest.

Although totally exhausted from his search, self-recrimination kept him from immediately dozing off. He had failed miserably in everything he had tried, in his attempts to find Metamor and in his search for the mahu, a ludicrous proposition to begin with. He knew for certain that he would never be able to help Teresa. He had alienated Deanna and had totally insulted Bonnie and Sparrow. Not to mention that he would probably have to deal with the DEA in the morning. He should have remained in the frigid, polar regions of Tunu when he had the chance.

Life would have been so much easier for everybody. Now, the easiest solution would be to simply step off the ledge and not have to worry about any of it ever again.

Credit continued to wallow in the pangs of self-pity until sleep finally overtook him. Once again, he slipped unaware through the purple mist.

"What did Buckley say?"

"Couldn't get through. This damn cell phone is useless out here, and that wall phone isn't much better. Seems like communications have gone to hell. I guess we'll have to sleep in the car tonight."

"Well, I'm getting tired of this shit. We need to grab this bastard, Lews."

"This is Indian Reservation. You know Buckley wouldn't want us to make a scene."

"Shit. It was Frankie and that damned medical report that got Buck all worked up. Now he thinks the guy has some sort of super healing powers or something. Shit. Once they washed the blood off the S.O.B., they found out he wasn't as bad as they thought. That's all there is to it."

"I guess."

"All I know is, we worked on getting El Mano for two years, and when we finally get ready to nail the son-of-a-bitch, Lews steps in and screws it all up. I hate that bastard now, hate him more than I hate that damned Columbian. Especially for running us all over the countryside. And now that the damn world's coming apart at the seams, Buckley's got us chasing these two weirdoes all over God's creation. I say we grab him first thing in the morning and get it over with. They know we're following them, for christ's sakes. We can answer to Buckley later. There are more important things to do than this."

"Are you with me?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Good. I've got dibs on the back seat."

38 Teresa/Flipside

She had used the last of her remaining strength to reach the tops of the trees, but being unable to maintain her balance there on the limbs, she haphazardly fluttered and tumbled back down through the canopy until she landed in a precarious position on the edge of a fathomless ravine. She felt compelled to gaze into the swirling, blue mist. A void of Death had driven her from the Earth, and Death continued to stare back at her from every direction in which she looked, leaving her with no alternative but to face the inevitable. Her magic had gained her nothing but a brief, solitary respite.

Although this was not the way she had envisioned her last moments of life to be like, she had no regrets, nothing to be sorry for. She had lived a long, productive life. And if she had helped Credit Lews awaken from his coma, if she had helped in even an insignificant way to forestall a new, dark age on Earth, then it was all the more worthwhile.

As she teetered on the brink of the ravine, she vocally thanked the Creator for His gracious gift of life.

And then she slowly spread her wings.

39 Flipside

When he reached the third floor balcony he paused and leaned over the railing. Soft light from the low hanging chandeliers mixed with natural light from the sky windows to feed the row of lush, tropical trees and shrubs that ran the center of the mall-like dormitory, creating a pleasant enough atmosphere. But the blinding glint from the excessive silver and gold plating that surrounded the administration doors and windows assaulted his eyes and caused him to quickly turn away.

Boy, what people won't do to feed their ego, he lamented with disdain.

Outlandishly lavish and opulent by any standards, the building was downright

decadent for a university, and he promised himself once again that he would not get caught up in the extravagance and self-indulgence of his surroundings.

When he reached his dormitory suite he enthusiastically greeted his new roommates. He found that they were very much as he had presumed they would be; rich kids with chiseled good looks; all of them spoiled, self-centered and conceited as hell. He figured that these preppies would proceed to pull all the sophomoric pranks expected of them--very properly and obediently.

When the appropriate pleasantries finally ended, he sauntered over to his desk and unpacked his knapsack. For the first time he realized that the experience was going to be much harder than he had anticipated and he wondered if he had gotten in over his head. He may have made a gross miscalculation. He had come to the University hoping to acquire that last piece of vital knowledge that continued to elude him. Without it, he could go no further in his quest.

But the University was very clever this time around. Even all of the beds were in the same room. With no privacy whatsoever, the peer pressure would be overwhelming. It would be extremely difficult to avoid being processed into the system.

Categorically, he reviewed the strategy that he had prepared for himself; to be friendly and congenial on the outside, malleable to their interests, but not letting on to his true inner feelings. Any changes he made would remain superficial. He would deflect all inquiries so as to remain vague, secretive, and elusive, which

would keep everyone confused as to which aspects of his character needed to be molded into conformity. He would not allow them to program him, strip him of his creativity, nor pin a label on him. He would not sacrifice his freedom and he would not become dependent upon their system.

Seeking to immerse himself in his work, he spread his notes across the bed.

Several giggling girls entered the room, bouncing and jiggling their bodies in an enticing manner. His roommates gathered around them like vultures.

God! Was he also going to have to put up with that juvenile prattle? People were supposed to be there to learn, he fumed. He irritably shuffled his papers.

"Hi! I think we're supposed to be together!" came a light, sweet voice.

He looked up to find a young woman sitting in his chair. His initial impression was that she was definitely well fed.

"And why are we supposed to be together?" he challenged.

"Lighten up, will ya! We've come over here to fuck you guys!" she nervously blurted out.

He wasn't sure that he had heard her correctly until he made a quick inventory of the room. Everybody else had already paired off. They were giggling idiotically as they got naked. In the bunk next to him, the blond bimbo was on her back with her head hanging over the edge, her huge breasts rolling erotically. One of his perfectly sculptured roommates was beginning to mount her.

He turned back to the red-head. "So, you got stuck with me, huh?"

"I guess so," she replied with a coy smile.

The sounds of bouncing bed springs had begun to make him dizzy. Although it galled him that he would have to swallow his pride and reassess his disparaging opinion of the University, he knew that there was no way he could pass up the opportunity in front of him. Even though the girl was plump, he had to admit she exuded a certain amount of charm.

"I guess we ought to do it," he suggested with a smile.

"I guess so," she grinned.

And then she was on top of him and he was experiencing an array of fleeting, but reeling sensory perceptions. When they finished, she slumped down upon him, breathing heavily, her knees by his side.

"Jeez, I just knew this would be good," she moaned in his ear.

Although sweaty and clammy from their workout, her skin felt good against his flesh. The position seemed natural and somehow very familiar. He lovingly caressed her back. She felt so light and thin.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes.

"You know, I told them I wouldn't do this unless I got the first pick," she confided. "I hope you're not mad."

Before he could reply, the grunts and giggles of the others once again pervaded the room.

"There's something we need to talk about," she said. "Is there a place where we can be alone?"

"Do you want to go for a ride in the countryside?"

"Do you know how to get out of here? This place is like a maze."

"I wouldn't be here unless I had an escape route," he explained as he stepped into his pants.

He noted her look of dismay after he made the comment, and briefly wondered why it would upset her.

They took the elevator to the first floor, where he directed her across the busy plaza to a long, narrow hallway with a door at the far end. He watched her closely as she walked ahead of him. He felt inexplicably attached to the girl. She seemed so right and familiar, as if they had always been together. And to think that he had thought she was chubby when they first met! This woman didn't have an ounce of fat on her sexy, lithe frame.

It suddenly dawned on him that the woman was Bonnie, and he wondered why he had not recognized her before.

Was she aware that he had made love to her not knowing who she was? He decided to let the matter pass, and hoped that the question did not arise again.

"The door's locked," she said as she rattled the doorknob.

Credit smiled sheepishly as he reached into his pocket.

"I've got the key," he said, although he knew full well now that Bonnie was the key.

"Where are we?" she asked after they stepped through the door.

Credit looked around in recognition. Green hills rolled endlessly in the valley below. The wooden door of a very small chapel was at their back. He had been there before with Jason.

"This is the Historical Site in Tunu," he said as he realized that he was in a dream.

"Why were you at the University?"

"I don't know," he replied hesitantly. "Looking for something, I guess."

"What were you looking for?"

"What I haven't been able to discover by myself."

"And what is that?"

"If I knew, then I wouldn't be looking for it, would I?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"You're Bonnie," he retorted. The questions were beginning to become an irritant.

More than that, he didn't like where they were leading.

"Did you know that before? When we were making love?"

"What is this?" he whined. "Why the third degree?"

"Why won't you answer my questions?"

He decided not to answer.

"What's wrong with you? What happened to you when you were in that coma?"

Bonnie pleaded.

"I don't know!" he forcefully insisted. "I'm just not myself anymore. There are things I can't remember," he grudgingly admitted.

"Well, you've really developed a fucking attitude, I hope you know. Have you spoken with Jason since you awoke from the coma? You know he's worried sick about you."

"I've called him."

"In your dream?"

"What difference does it make? I told you, I've called him."

Credit pointed his finger in the air and shushed her as he took notice of the flute music. He wondered if it had been playing all along and he just hadn't snapped to the fact. He stepped over to the plaque near the edge of the hill.

"We need to help Teresa," Bonnie mentioned in a defeated tone of voice. "Do you know how to find her?"

Credit looked down at the plaque and read the words.

You can get there from here.

All roads lead from

the STATION.

"Appropriate," Bonnie commented as she crept up behind Credit. "How come you call this the Historical Site?"

"I have a bad time with names."

"Are we going to help Teresa?"

"Let's try one of the trails that lead down the hill."

Numerous walkways descended the hillside, creating an intricate maze between beautifully sculptured gardens. But Credit was unsure if all paths would lead to the same end. His choice was made simple when he realized that the flute music originated from one specific trail, and they began their descent through shaded beds of tulips and azaleas.

"Where are we going?" Bonnie asked.

"We need to find the flute player. Do you hear that music?"

"I'm not deaf."

The vegetation along the trail made a gradual transition from the lush flower beds to scrubby, desert shrubbery. The path ended at a rocky, rugged outcrop just below the top of a sheer cliff. Day had turned into night. Stars shone brightly in a vast sky. The sound of the flute was loud, clear and sweet.

"Hey! That's you!" Bonnie exclaimed. She pointed towards a sleeping man who was wedged between two boulders.

"Don't wake him up, whatever you do," Credit advised.

"I'm not stupid, either," Bonnie retorted.

The flute music suddenly stopped.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, skywalker. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to find me."

On top of the boulder next to his sleeping body stood the mahu. Although his music had been as rich and voluminous as ever, his physical stature had shrunk to approximately three inches tall.

"I am a wanderer," Credit softly replied. "I like to take the long road."

The mahu stared at him in a probing manner.

"You may be a wanderer, but you no longer have the luxury of taking the long road. Not when a friend of yours is in danger."

"It's a convenient excuse he makes for himself," Bonnie insisted. "So he doesn't have to make a decision."

"By the way, my name is Bonnie."

The mahu reached out his hand. "It is an honor to make the acquaintance of a Dreamweaver," he said as he touched her finger.

Bonnie shot Credit a gloating look.

The mahu continued to concentrate on Bonnie. "What you say about our friend here is partially true," he said, referring to Credit. "But we should not judge him too harshly. An old nemesis impedes his life fire, causing him to battle himself. It was a wonder that he even found the strength to find me. Still, time has run very short. If we are to save your friend and defeat the designs of the Deceiver, then we must leave immediately for Teotihuacan."

Without hesitation, the mahu conjured up the magic from his flute and instantaneously swept them both up, transporting them to Teotihuacan. Or was Teotihuacan brought to them? Having accidentally caught a glimpse of the transition, Credit was suddenly unsure.

But it didn't matter in the least. The fact was, they were standing inside the Temple of Quetzalpapalotl. Although the exquisite detail of the bird remained intact, the mural had faded badly. The owl was barely visible on the wall.

The flute player played a soft, probing song.

"What happened to her?" Credit asked when the mahu had finished.

"A simple spell. Like the Dreamweaver, this one also followed you to Metamor, only she doesn't have the strength to return."

"Well, why all the god-damned hocus pocus?" Credit asked. "And why go to Metamor when she could have just woken up back at Sierra Chino? That's what everybody tells me all the damn time. 'Just wake up.'"

"Because she is an old woman; weak from the trauma. She would have died if she had tried to wake up," the mahu stated simply.

He turned to Bonnie. "It should be no trouble for my music to locate the Curandera, but my notes cannot entice her to return. You must accompany them."

Bonnie's eyes widened as a lump developed in her throat. The idea of returning to the Blue World seemed totally repugnant.

"Has she gone into the tunnels?" she queried with trepidation.

"No. That was the Timewalkers journey. You followed him there because you are a dreamweaver, and that was where his dream led you. If the Curandera has plunged into the chasm, her experience will be much different."

"My trips to Metamor are the cause of all this," Credit muttered. "It is the source of my confusion. You both know that. I'll go for Teresa. It's my fault she's there in the first place." Credit hoped that his offer sounded plausible and did not reveal the fact that he had an ulterior motive. He knew it might be the only opportunity he'd ever get to once again enter Metamor, where the answers to the Mysteries were awaiting him.

"The Blue World is closed to you," the mahu stated emphatically. "Your time in Metamor is over. You can no longer enter there."

"What do you mean?"

"If you go there you will die. Just like that," the mahu said as he snapped his fingers. "You are two ticks away from death there."

"But I was on the brink of learning the Mysteries of Creation!" Credit protested.

"You were on the brink of death!"

"But I lost part of myself there. What will I do?" Credit whined. "Never again will I be complete!" He felt a cold panic begin to set in.

"You were never complete to begin with! Your confusion stems from Mochni. The Deceiver is a dark void upon your spirit. Mochni lost his form, but not his life. He attached himself to you when you were on your way to Metamor. But he would not let you die there, which you seemed to be trying to do, or he, too, would have been trapped there. He pulled you out of the Blue World when you were only two heart beats away from your death."

Bonnie glared at Credit. "I can't believe how self-centered you've become!" she lashed out. "Teresa's life is fading as we stand here."

"Yes, we must make haste," the mahu concurred. "Cling tightly to my notes and they will carry you along," he said to Bonnie. "When you reach your friend, coax her to come with you. I will sense the vibrations and bring you back. Pray that we are not too late."

"And what the fuck am I supposed to do?" Credit interceded, preventing the flute player from beginning his song.

"You could begin by healing yourself," the mahu declared. "The time will come when you will be called upon to act. Be sure that you are ready."

"How?"

"You are a skywalker. Chase away the void in your spirit."

The hunchback put the flute to his lips and Bonnie was swept up and away by the notes.

Feeling useless and rejected, Credit sat on the floor in the middle of the room and glumly listened to the music.

Heal thyself, he muttered to himself. "Chase away the void in your spirit," he mimicked, mocking the wispy voice of the miniature flute player.

Fuck the mahu's generalizations, he concluded. Why the hell didn't he just tell him what to do?

But as he watched the notes rise from the flute and disappear through a crack in the air, the soothing rhythm began to calm him. Gradually, his thoughts became more coherent and it soon dawned on him that the mahu had not minced words. He had been told exactly what to do. He was a skywalker, for Christ sakes!

He split his awareness to view himself from above and then deliberately bounced between perspectives. It became apparent that his ability to reason was being attacked. When he was in the air his thought pattern was clear and concise, but when he viewed the room from his original perspective, he was a hot bed of conflict, seething with feelings of anger, guilt, and disgust.

Deciding that his vantage point near the ceiling was entirely more desirable, he maintained his perspective from the air and soon became fixated by the sight of his own figure sitting sullenly on the floor. When he perceived the life-fire

burning there, it became obvious that a void was within him. But his luminosity there was not fading as he assumed it should be. Instead, it was slowly gaining in radiance, and he realized that the void was becoming unwound. His own intense scrutiny was drawing it towards the ceiling!

Since Mochni's purpose was to deceive and confuse, Credit reasoned, the parrot would gravitate towards cohesive thought like a magnet, in order to poison it. Credit figured that as long as he maintained a clear perspective from the ceiling, the void would continue to unravel.

As he waited impatiently for Mochni to unfurl, he noticed that the mahu's notes were no longer slipping so easily through the crack between the worlds, but instead were beginning to congest around the opening. He watched in suspense as the overcrowding continued to surge, and then suddenly ease. The notes reversed momentum and began flowing back into the flute.

And then the song ended.

*

From the moment she grasped hold of the mahu's magical song she found herself high above the plains of Metamor, riding the musical notes like a roller coaster, racing along with blinding speed, angling towards the formica surface. She watched in awe as an indistinguishable speck on the horizon grew swiftly into three gigantic pyramids. As she zoomed in on them she felt intensely intimidated and then threatened by their immensity. But then the notes dipped and dove and she found herself heading towards the repulsive blue chasm.

Instead of plunging deep into the swirling mists as she anticipated, the notes clustered up just below the formica surface, revealing to Bonnie an unsuspected emerald green forest.

"Let me be!" she heard a voice scream. "What kind of sorcery is this?"

The everlasting notes were pummeling an owl, keeping it off balance, preventing it from flying into the engulfing blue mists of the chasm.

Bonnie gleefully shouted out. She knew without a doubt that the owl was Teresa. "It's me! Bonnie! I've come to take you home!" The notes, ever in motion, jostled Bonnie to keep her positioned in front of the owl.

"Go away!" Teresa cried. "Can't you see I have no strength to return?" The owl's feeble struggle against the resilient bubbles was decidedly pathetic.

"It won't take any strength to return," Bonnie explained. "If you don't struggle against them, the notes will carry us."

"And when we get back?"

"We can help," Bonnie promised.

"There is nothing you can do. You are young and strong, but I am a weak old woman who has lived a full life. It is my time to go. Death stares back at me from every direction I look, including yours."

"Your time on Earth is not up. Great changes are beginning to occur. There is much to be done. Credit is waiting to help." It was only a little white lie.

"Then he is awake. Good. My purpose was accomplished."

"And the creature that is making these notes can also help." More so than Credit, she thought. "We need you, Teresa," Bonnie pleaded. "Please come with me. Lucheza is lonely."

Teresa winced.

"Lucheza?"

Bonnie sensed the resistance begin to erode.

"If you are going to die anyway," she whispered, "at least come back and say good-by to Lucheza."

*

When the song ended, the exhausted mahu slumped back and teetered on the edge of consciousness. The mural was gone from the wall and an owl was lying motionless on the floor, its life-fire weak and flickering. Bonnie was leaning over it. She glanced back at Credit, saw him sitting numbly on the floor, and gave him a look of disgust.

Credit watched from the air as the void finally detached itself from his alter-ego on the ground. But instead of heading towards him at the ceiling as he had presumed it would, Mochni immediately attached itself to the dying owl. The body jerked.

Bonnie once again turned towards his essence on the floor and pleadingly shouted, "Good god, Credit, do something!"

Credit could no longer remain idly detached. He merged his awareness and stood up. Without hesitation, he gently lifted the owl in both arms and rushed towards the temple door. To his shocking surprise, he found a guard standing there, confusion and panic written all over the man's face. Credit closed his eyes and braced himself for the impending collision.

Instead, he stepped from the purple mist onto the firmly packed sand of a tall dune. He was no longer holding an owl. Teresa was in his arms. He stared out over the restless, gray sea and anxiously hoped that Bonnie and the mahu would also make the crossing. He chided himself for having deserted her once again.

"Hey! C'mon! What's the hold up?"

He glanced down the back side of the dune and saw Sparrow standing next to a waterfall. He was at the room of healing.

"Are you going to let her die in your arms, or what?"

He slid down the embankment and they entered the room. Very carefully, he placed Teresa on the stone altar.

"She'll be just fine now, thanks to you," Sparrow whispered as they stepped into the hallway. "I want you to know I'm very proud of you. You knew just what to do."

"I could have saved everyone a lot of trouble by doing it the first time around."

"It doesn't matter now. You saved her."

"But I blew it with Bonnie. She'll never want to see me again," he sourly noted as he listened to the litany within the room begin to rise in tempo. He could imagine the beams of light working their healing magic on Teresa.

"The void was a difficult obstacle to overcome," Sparrow said. "Like the deceptions he spread, Mochni's presence was not an easy one to detect. Even I didn't have a clue."

"When he left me, he attached himself to Teresa. He's in there with her right now." Credit fretted.

"There is no equal to the room of healing," Sparrow assured him. "I think Mochni will emerge with a completely new outlook. He will probably be so nice he won't even know himself."

Credit noticed the sound of a flute subtly intermixed with that of the choir and he knew that its origins did not come from within the room.

"I've got to go," he suddenly exclaimed. "Meet me again at the Station!"

He bolted down the hallway and then shot to the top of the dune, certain that he would find Bonnie and the mahu waiting there.

But there was no one in sight.

He then realized that the music did not originate from any particular direction. It was all around him and within him.

Damn, he thought. He stomped his foot in the sand and promptly lost his balance. Awkwardly, he tumbled down the slope of the dune. When he came to rest, he was wedged between two boulders. The sun was rising over a distant mesa.

40 Old Oraibi

Deanna abruptly sat up, awakened by the commotion outside the window.

Jonathan, the old Indian in whose house she slept, was kneeling beside her, urging her to remain quiet.

"Important people are looking for you and your husband," he whispered. "They are asking everybody. Perhaps Johnny can get rid of them."

Unable to resist, Deanna peeked through the curtains and saw the DEA agents flashing their identification at the boy.

"We are looking for the man and woman who arrived in this car. We would like to know where they are," one of them said.

"Why are you looking for them?" Johnny probed.

"We are not at liberty to divulge that information. Besides, it's none of your business. When we find them, we will leave. We have no quarrel with you or your people."

Johnny uneasily shuffled his feet. He was uncomfortable with the fact that both agents were armed. White people brought nothing but trouble.

"I saw both of them walk out onto the mesa," he finally volunteered. "Since they are also trespassing, I will take you out there."

Although initially relieved that her presence had not been revealed, Deanna felt a sudden surge of stifling frustration. She knew she had to warn Credit.

The old Hopi held her firmly as he put his finger to her lips. "Wait," he urged.

"Wait until they leave. Johnny doesn't know where your husband has gone."

"My friend," Deanna corrected.

The definition of their relationship did not matter to the old man. "No doubt, Johnny will lead them randomly across the mesa with the hope of accidentally stumbling onto your man. If we are smart, perhaps we can get there first."

He cautiously stepped to the door. After making certain they would not be noticed, he motioned for her to follow.

"Come on," he said as he led her around the house to an old Jeep. "If you know how to drive this contraption, I will show you the way. By the sound of the music, the flautist and your friend are not far away."

Deanna turned the key in the ignition and revved the engine. With the old man riding shotgun, she popped the clutch and sped through the village. They quickly passed Johnny and the government agents and then made a sharp turn off the highway onto a rugged track that led into the heart of Third Mesa. A short distance north, the old man had her turn again towards the eastern edge of the mesa. Approximately eighty feet from the precipice, they pulled to a stop. Deanna quickly jumped from the Jeep, relying on the old man for directions. But he seemed momentarily confused.

"The music has stopped," was his only comment.

She looked around and found the agents coming into sight on a dead run. It would be only moments before they arrived.

"We're too late," she uttered.

As her spirit began to deflate, she heard the crisp sound of a flute. The notes came gurgling up from below the rim, clear, full, and concise; a spellbinding melody.

When she looked, she saw Credit come bounding up from below the ledge. He stood on the mesa top, gazing up at the sky.

"Credit, run!" she shouted as she began to move in his direction.

Johnny and the agents were right behind her. Credit glanced their way, hesitated, and then, reluctantly, reached his arms into the air.

41 Third Mesa

The sun was beginning to rise over Second Mesa.

"You're awake!"

"Are you sure?" Credit inquired with an air of uncertainty. Ordinarily, he would have agreed, since this was the exact place where he had fallen asleep. But he was speaking to the mahu, who stood not two feet from his face!

"Whoa! What's wrong?" the grasshopper laughed. "You think I'm not real? Only a dream, maybe, or a figment of your imagination?"

"I guess so," Credit grinned. "Are you sure I'm awake?"

"I'm sure. And since you are no longer under Mochni's spell, you should also be sure. Unfortunately, we haven't time to discuss it right now. There is a pretty woman waiting for you. And you have no time to waste."

Credit wanted to see Bonnie more than anything else in the world, but he couldn't see the point in hurrying. After all, if she was truly in Copper Canyon, then she was over a thousand miles away. What difference would a few minutes make?

"Are you going to transport me with your flute?" he asked, half in jest.

"No," the mahu answered. "I have no time. I am needed elsewhere to help calm the rumblings in the Earth. Listen closely. Do you hear that melody?"

Credit could barely make out the wisp-like tone of another flute. He nodded his head in the affirmative.

"If you act now, my brother can take you to the Dreamweaver. The only thing that you will need when you get there is water, and that should not be too difficult for you. The Dreamweaver picked the ideal spot." The mahu grinned like a silly clown.

Credit wondered what the hell he was talking about.

The flute player was enjoying his ambiguity. "I see you've forgotten the lesson I gave you almost two-thousand years ago," he chuckled. "Don't you remember the lines?"

The lines?

"But I'm awake," Credit protested. "The lines can't transport my body."

"We are from the Fathersun. You know that."

The faint sound of an automobile engine drifted down from atop the mesa.

"We must hurry. My flute will enable you to see the lines. Decide what you want to do."

The mahu raised the flute to his lips and Credit became instantly mesmerized by the magical melody, the millions of tiny notes that changed his perception of reality. He saw the sky come alive with bright, glowing fibers, the web of the Grandmother Spider. A major group of those lines touched the Earth directly above them on the mesa rim. Among the thousands of individual strands, Credit picked out one that was coated with luminous, silvery-gray bubbles, the notes from another magical flute. Without a doubt, that was the line that would take him to Bonnie.

Credit reached the mesa top in three powerful leaps, but then hesitated when he heard his name being called. He saw Deanna running towards him with several other people giving chase behind her, among them the DEA agents.

Credit wavered. Damn! He had forgotten all about Deanna.

As he reached his arms for the sky, he heard the mahu shout.

"Don't forget the water!"

42 Copper Canyon

She lay on the cold floor of the cave, very thankful for the blanket her friend had provided. Although morning had arrived, the dark shadows that clung stubbornly to the canyon bottom retained the crispness of the night time air.

She drew her legs to her chest and readjusted her wrap. Her dream had left her emotionally drained. Credit had walked out on her again. Had just grabbed Teresa and vanished, with no explanation offered. Did he think so little of her now? Had Deanna been right when she said he wanted her only for sex?

The hollow sound of a reed flute broke the stillness of the morning. It drifted from across the river to soften her mood. At least her Tarahumara friend had not deserted her. She felt safe and secure knowing that he was still keeping vigil.

She stood up and stretched and then took the trail to the rope bridge, where she stooped to splash water on her face. She hoped that her friend would bring her breakfast. Figs or oranges would be nice. And fresh spring water. She would need it in order to make the long climb back out of the canyon. She had a train to catch. She was no longer eager to see Credit, but Camrod was waiting for her in Presidio.

When she finished washing her face, she noted that the hollow sound of the flute had grown much deeper and richer. Indeed, it was no longer a solo venture, but a duet of crystal phosphorescence, unfathomable in its brilliance. It was the music of the mahu!

But accompanying the two flutes was another sound that struck her as being out of place. It was a faint scream or a shouting voice. Or was it laughter echoing off the canyon walls? Whatever it was, it was spontaneous and intoxicating, and becoming gradually louder. And amazingly more familiar. Her body tensed as she gazed up the river in anticipation.

She saw a man come into view, frolicking in the rushing water, laughing deliriously. It was Credit!

He skillfully worked the current and then came to shore at the rope bridge.

"I don't believe it!" she shouted. "Where did you come from? How did you get here?"

Without responding, he hungrily embraced her, and then picked her up and twirled her around in a circle.

"Oh god, it's so good to be with you again!" he shouted. "We are awake, aren't we?"

"Put me down," she angrily demanded. "I'm mad at you! You treat me like shit and then expect me to snuggle up to you? Well, it's my turn to walk, mister. Touch me again and you'll find out real quick whether you're awake or not."

"I guess I should apologize, shouldn't I," he weakly offered. It was just too hard to keep his bubbling enthusiasm in check.

"I think we're well past that," Bonnie persisted. "I think you've made it quite clear that you're not interested anymore."

"Do not judge him too harshly," advised a high pitched voice. "He had been under the spell of a dark cloud. Mochni was a subtle poison that clung to his life fire and distorted his decisions. His choices were not always his own."

They turned in unison to find a gray mahu sitting on top of one of the bridge posts. He was no larger than the blue mahu.

Credit wanted to thank him for his help, but he felt suddenly sick and nauseous. He doubled over and began to heave, but his stomach was empty.

“Get back into the creek,” advised the gray mahu. “You have gone through an ordeal. You are physically weak. The water will help solidify your body, but you need food and sleep.”

Bonnie, suddenly very concerned, assisted him into the river. Food did not appeal to Credit at all, but sleep seemed very inviting.

“Bring him in and out of the water as need be,” the mahu said to her. “Give him food, a little at a time. Keep him warm and make sure he sleeps in the cave. The Earth around him will also nurse him back to good health. It may take several days, but I’m sure he will be all right.”

"I want to thank you for helping us," Bonnie said.

"On the contrary, Dreamweaver, it is the two of you who have helped us. It is you who deserve the thanks.

“I am needed elsewhere now, but if you do as I advised, am I sure everything will turn out for the best.”

“Before you go, please answer me one question. How did Credit get here?”

“Energy lines surround the Earth,” the flute player explained. “Contemporary man accepts the laws of gravity, and in so doing binds himself to the planet. But

once one learns that he is really fire from the sun, the laws of gravity don't always apply. It becomes possible to ride the web of the Spider Woman."

"I knew I shouldn't have asked," she muttered in response. "I don't admit to understanding any of this."

"But riding those lines is very stressful," he continued. "Although you are fire from the Sunfather, you need the Earth to compliment awareness and perpetuate knowledge, and so you must also abide by Her laws. The water has solidified him after his trip, but it takes time for the body to truly re-adapt."

"There are people here to help you. You will be fine."

And then, in the blink of an eye, the mahu was gone.

After some time in the water, Bonnie helped Credit to the cave. He ate a very little bit of fruit and pinole, and then lied down to rest. Bonnie covered him and then lied down beside him.

43 Flipside

He stood on the green, shaded lawn at the top of the escarpment. Flower gardens decorated the hill side. In the distance, down in the valley past the diminutive shack, were rolling, tree covered hills. He had arrived at the Station as planned.

He looked around for Bonnie and Sparrow, and not seeing them on the grounds, he strolled towards the church building to take a look inside.

As he neared the chapel he found a rectangular canvass tarpaulin spread out on the ground. He lifted one corner and discovered a freshly dug grave. Although it was only a foot or two deep, it did not forebode well.

"It's about time you got here!" Bonnie shouted as she stepped outside the door of the Station. "There's a lot of neat stuff in here. Have you seen the inside? The place is huge!"

"Yeah." Credit lifted his head and saw Sparrow hiding behind Bonnie.

"Oh, jeez," he moaned. "Now I'm in trouble for sure. I hope you two ain't gonna pal around all the time."

"You betcha, boss," they replied in unison.

He shook his head as if to signify no hope.

"What do you think of this grave?" he asked in a serious tone.

"I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine," Sparrow replied.

"I hope it's not for Teresa."

"Will you lighten up?" Bonnie insisted. "It's probably going to be a flower bed."

"You surprise me," Credit assailed. "I thought you'd be jealous of Sparrow. Instead, you two look like best friends."

"You're the dreamer. We're the dreamweavers."

"She knows I'm too old for you," Sparrow said.

"You got that right," Credit exclaimed. "Come on, let's take a walk."

Credit led them down one of the twisting garden paths. They turned a sharp corner and found themselves standing below a steep mesa wall.

Credit looked around and noticed a man with a gun strapped over his back and a belt of bullets crossing his chest. He was lighting a cigarette.

"Antonio! How goes it?"

Antonio smiled and motioned for them to be on their way.

"Let's go get a beer," Credit said.

He led them across the cane infested waterway to the shack. A neon sign above the door flashed the words "Home, Sweet Home." They entered the building.

The men from Qattarah were sitting around a table. Acknowledgements were made silently with a nod of the head. A very pretty waitress stood next to the men, a smile on her face and three beers on her tray. Credit, Bonnie, and Sparrow picked out a table and sat down. The waitress placed the beers in front of them.

"So, this is Qattarah," Credit said quietly as he sipped on his beer.

"Sí, sí" nodded the men.

"Where all things are known?"

“Yes, yes. Where all things are known,” they admitted.

“It has been a while since I was last here.”

“We have been waiting for your return.”

“I think you already know Bonnie and Sparrow?”

“Sí. We have met them.”

“So, what is on your mind?”

“Is Teresa all right?”

“Yes, thanks to the three of you.”

“And others.”

“Yes, you had much help.”

“But that is not why you are here.”

“If you only wanted to know about Teresa, you would just go visit her.”

“There is something else on your mind. What is it you would like to know?”

“In my recent journeys,” Credit started out, “I have wandered through time. I have met a very funny creature, a flute player who is a mahu. I have witnessed the fall of Tenochtitlan and I have been drawn to the Hopi mesas. I have met a Hopi woman who is sitting beside me right now, some one you all know very well.

“When I first met Sparrow, she alluded to the fact that I may be Pahana, the white man her people were waiting for to fulfill their prophecy. And that is the question I want to ask of you. Is that me? Am I Pahana?”

Credit stared back and forth at the old men and Sparrow. They all seemed to be deep in thought. Raphael scratched his head. Reuben cleared his throat, but said nothing, a solemn look upon his face.

Ramon finally spoke.

“We were wondering much the same thing the other day,” he said. “In fact, I asked Raphael here, ‘Who do you think this Credit Lewis is?’”

The men continued to look serious and thoughtful. No one said a word.

“Do you think he is Christopher Columbus returned to us?”

“I was thinking more like Hernan Cortez,” said Raphael.

“Or Abraham Lincoln,” added Reuben, a sparkle in his eyes.

Raphael began to giggle.

“Ethel Mertz.”

“That’s Vivian Vance, stupid.”

“Her, too!”

“It’s Lady Godiva!”

All three men were slapping their thighs and laughing hard. Raphael spit out his beer. Ramon had slipped off his chair and was rolling around on the floor calling out ridiculous names. Even Bonnie and Sparrow had gone from astonishment to laughing uproariously.

“It’s Howdy Doody time!”

“Bugs Bunny!”

“Michael Jackson,” Bonnie added with a coy smile.

Credit leaned back in his chair and cursed under his breath. Damn, he thought, the things he had to put up with.

Everyone had almost calmed down when Reuben spoke.

“And to think, this is the stuff legends will be made of.” And they all started to hoot and howl once again.

Bonnie stood up behind Credit and put her hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“Now I know what the word ‘incorrigible’ means,” she whispered. “These old men are worse than you are.”

“All kidding aside,” Ramon said after everyone had composed themselves once again, “you are simply you; Credit Lews, a writer and an amateur historian. You are a dreamer and a skywalker, and you can dance through time. You have the stuff that legends will be made of. And yes, you will play an integral part in the return of Pahana.”

“Then Pahana truly is returning?” asked Sparrow.

“What better way to begin the new Age than with the fulfillment of prophecy?”

“Still, a rocky road lies ahead. And nothing is set in stone.”

“Yes. We are getting close to the end of the Age,” said Raphael.

“The Mayan Age?” asked Bonnie.

“That is how it is known. But the Age does not belong solely to the Mayans. I dare say that it belongs to everyone,” Rueben said.

“Furthermore,” added Raphael, “nothing starts or stops on a dime, as the saying goes. While there is a set date for the end of the Age, it may take several hundred years for momentum to get us up to speed.”

“Still, when changes to the Earth occur during one’s lifetime, you know events are moving rapidly. As the Earth warms and glaciers melt, more natural disasters will occur; earthquakes, tidal waves, horrific storms, volcanic eruptions. But as the Earth evolves, so too does man’s consciousness. Everything is intertwined.

Abilities that were hidden or lying dormant suddenly become active. What was considered to be myth suddenly becomes reality.”

“We can sit here and chat about this forever, but it accomplishes nothing.”

“You should go visit your son.”

“Yes. We think you will find a visit to your son to be highly informative.”

“We need to check on Teresa, too,” Bonnie said. “Sparrow?”

“I can’t go to Earth,” she said. “Besides, I still have business to conduct with these old farts. They’re not keeping me informed like they should be.”

Credit finished his beer and then pushed himself away from the table.

“Adios, amigos. We’ll catch you on the rebound.”

He took Bonnie’s hand and they stepped outside. But instead of heading for the spring and the mesa wall, Credit led Bonnie through the haze into the underbrush. Voices could be heard, and they crept through the thick mesquite to a nearby clearing.

“Let’s see what’s happening before we make ourselves known,” Credit whispered.

They crept to the edge of the trees and peered into the yard. Teresa was there along with Mark and Deanna and two other people. The Curandera looked healthy and well.

"That's Lena and Camrod. Remember? From New Orleans?" Bonnie whispered excitedly. "Camrod's the shape changer who helped me get to Copper Canyon. Lena sees the future."

As Credit gazed at the people gathered there, he too caught a glimpse of the future. Teresa was a healer. Mark was incredibly clever when it came to technology. Surely, Deanna was good for something. In any event, it was not going to be a lonely road.

"Listen," he whispered to Bonnie.

Deanna was in the midst of telling her story. "...I finally heard the flute! I did! And when I looked, Credit was standing on the edge of the mesa. When he saw us coming, he put his arms into the air as if to surrender. And then there was an incredible peel of thunder, and a shock wave caused everyone to drop to the ground. The wind rushed back in from behind us and when it stopped, Credit was gone."

"What did the old Hopi man have to say?" Teresa inquired.

"Jonathan kept mumbling something about old myths, the Grandmother Spider or something. Johnny looked scared, and thought we were all crazy. Like everyone else, the agents were dumbfounded. And madder than hell when they couldn't find Credit. I thought I was in for big trouble but they just let me go, like they were washing their hands of the entire episode."

"And what did you see?" Mark asked.

"I saw Credit leap into the air and disappear."

"I was pulled into the air," Credit announced as he stepped into the clearing with Bonnie.

Deanna and Teresa both shouted in unison. "It's Credit! And there's Bonnie!"

"They're dreaming!"

"Where?" Mark asked as he squinted into the cloud of confusion.

Everyone else was pointing and giggling.

"Oh, now I see them. It sure helps to know what you're looking for," he said after his perception had altered. "How come they don't have any clothes on?"

Immediately, Bonnie glanced down at herself. She turned beet red with embarrassment.

"This is his fault!" she shouted, making sure to place the blame.

She turned towards Credit. "This is your dream, you bastard! You're responsible for this!" she snapped, and then she quickly backed out of sight into the bush.

"I think I'm in big trouble," Credit announced with a huge grin. "I'm glad to see that you're well, Teresa."

"And you too, Mister Lews." Her smile revealed her deep sense of satisfaction at the way events had turned out.

"Where are you now, Credit?" Deanna demanded. "I mean, where is your body? How'd you get away?"

"It's a long story. Physically, Bonnie and I are both in the Sierra Madre here in Mexico. We just wanted to thank all of you for your help." He winked at Deanna and nodded at Lena and Camrod. "Big change is in the air, and I think we'll be seeing quite a bit of each other in the coming days. Just don't expect to see quite this much again."

He gave them a snappy salute.

"We need to go check on Jason now. Catch you all later," he said, and grinning like a naked chimp, he followed Bonnie into the chaparral.

44 Binghamton

It was the earliest snowfall on record. And it wasn't just a dusting. It was coming down in huge, heavy flakes. Already a foot and a half had accumulated, and the evening was still young.

Paul and Jason sat next to the window near the heater and watched the crowd gather in the third floor dormitory lobby. The second keg had already been tapped. The music was loud and the party was in full swing.

“This is to Al Gore!” shouted the Thing as he held his glass aloft. “No telling what this would be like if not for global warming!”

“Al Gore! Al Gore!” shouted the crowd, and then everybody swigged their beer.

Jason laughed and took a drink. Paul sat there and grinned.

“Global warming! Global warming!” Everybody swigged some more beer.

“This is getting pretty rowdy,” Jason said. “If you’d rather leave and go to the library or something, you know, that’s fine with me.”

“No way,” Paul answered. “I’m too young to drink, but I love the camaraderie. This is great. It’s fun.”

“I was thinking I didn’t want you to get caught at a keg party, but half the people here are underage anyway. I don’t guess anybody’s gonna get in trouble.”

“Half the dorm’s here. And the supervisors. And maybe the campus police. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Jason cracked open the window and looked outside. It was snowing so hard that he couldn’t even see across the quad. It was going to be a disaster. All the leaves were still on the trees. Branches would be snapping and the whole area would be shut down. It was a wonder the town and university still had power.

“Everything’s changing,” he murmured.

He closed the window and turned his attention back to the party.

“Hey, Sitter!” The Thing hollered at Jason. “Here’s to you and Half-Pint!”

“Sitter! Sitter! Half-Pint! Half-Pint!” Everybody swigged their beer.

Jason crossed the room and refilled his glass.

“Looking good, Evelyn,” he said as he put his arm around her waist.

She returned the hug. “So are you, hon.” She gave him a peck on his cheek. “If you ever get tired of the little creep hanging around, remember, you can always come and babysit me.”

“That might be fun,” Jason replied.

“I know it would be.”

They danced a while to the music and then Jason returned to the window.

“A hot little number,” he commented.

Paul just smiled.

Jason opened the window once again and peered outside.

“I’ll be damned,” he uttered.

“What?”

“Look out there. What do you see?”

Paul stuck his head out the window. Two people were below them, lying on their back on the ground. They were waving their arms and legs, making angels in the snow.

“That’s your dad,” Paul said.

“Yeah, and Bonnie.”

“They’re dreaming.”

“Hey, Thing!” Jason shouted across the room. “Com’ere. Look out here and tell me what you see.”

“What the Hell are you doing with the window open? It’s colder than Hell out there.” The Thing poked his head out the window. “What am I supposed to be looking at? I don’t see nothing but snow out there. You two are crazier than Hell.”

Jason gave him a nudge and the Thing knocked his head against the bottom of the window as he pulled back into the room.

“I figured as much, you son’s of bitches!” he screamed.

“Evelyn!” Jason said. “Com,ere. Look at this.”

Evelyn bent over, poked her butt in the air, and looked out the window. She looked back at Jason with a smile to make sure he was watching and then looked

down at the ground. “I don’t see anything. You two are just trying to get me to stick my butt in the air.”

“Yeah, and it’s working, too.”

“What do you have the window open for? It’s colder than Hades out there.”

“Michelle! Look out here and tell us what you see.”

“Besides the snow? Jeez, it’s coming down. There’s light down there. Two people with flashlights?”

Jason and Paul looked at each other in amazement.

“The girl has promise,” Jason commented.

“Looks like there’s hope for her, yet.”

“I guess we ought to go down there,” Jason said.

“No. We need to meet them in their dream,” Paul answered. “Let’s go back to our room.”

They slipped away from the party and went back to their dorm room. Jason lay down in his bed and Paul touched him on his forehead. Almost instantly, Jason was asleep.

Paul crossed the room and lay down. Within seconds, he too was sound asleep.

46 Flipside

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“Hey! We were hoping you’d notice. We didn’t want to intrude on your party.”

“We’re making our own version of crop circles,” Bonnie said.

“That would be cool, but it’s still snowing,” Jason replied. “It will be covered up by the time anyone sees it. By the way, this is Paul, dad. He’s the one I told you about on the phone.”

“We’ve met.”

“It’s good to meet you again, sir. And you, too, Bonnie.”

“Paul could be going to any University in the world; Harvard, Yale, anywhere. And he chose to come to Binghamton.”

“I’m here because this is where I needed to be. This is where my ‘sitter’ is.” Paul smiled. “A degree is really not going to help me. Besides, students don’t come to a University to seek knowledge any more. They come because it’s an investment. They hope to attain monetary awards for the time and work they put in. It is the cultural milieu we live in; a milieu that is subtly beginning to fade.

“But I’m very glad you came to see us, sir. There are some things I’d like to show you.”

“The men from Qattarah suggested we come here. They usually know what they’re talking about.”

“Thanks to Bonnie, I finally met them a short time ago. It’s funny. I’ve tried to go to Qattarah, but I can’t seem to find the way. Not many avenues are closed to me, but that is one of them.

“Please, all of you touch my hand.”

Jason, Bonnie and Credit reached out and touched Paul Hanaver on his hand. The next moment they were standing just below the top side of a desert mesa. It was

nighttime. Dim lights could be seen miles away in the broad, sweeping valley below. Pictographs were glowing on the wall behind them.

“This is where you brought me before,” Credit stated.

“Yes, sir. And it look’s like someone has been meddling with my things since the last time I was here. Some of my items have been displaced.”

“Really?”

“This spot is not as remote as you might think. Whoever found this place was probably supposed to find it.”

“It is also a power spot. A bundle of lines touch the ground here just below the hillside.”

“And in the valley there is an ancient spring. It went dry hundreds of years ago, but if everything goes well, it will soon spring to life once again.

“But the main thing we’re here for, I just wanted to show you the change in the shaman figures. You have gotten your glow back.”

“Why do you depict us like that?” Bonnie asked.

“Because that is how I see you. You have stepped outside the bounds of your body, and so you appear quite different from others.”

Credit noticed that the middle shaman figure was glowing much brighter than before. It had also grown much taller. The other two figures had also altered. Jason's had changed the most. He now stood much taller and brighter than Bonnie's figure, even though her pictograph was also brighter than before.

"This is pretty amazing," Jason said. "These drawings seem to be imbued with life. Paul tells me they change on their own without him even touching them."

Credit had noticed that other symbols had been added to the wall. Evidently, the story was unfolding a little at a time.

"Are you Pahana?" Bonnie asked Paul.

Paul smiled. "Not yet, ma'am."

"Not yet?"

"No, ma'am. The time is not yet right. I still have a ways to go, although I have to admit, time is running short."

A pebble suddenly dislodged on the hillside above them and rolled a short distance, startling them. They listened intently, but heard nothing more.

"I don't wish to be seen here, yet," Paul whispered. "Please, touch my hand again. There is something else I want to show you."

They all touched his hand once again and then found themselves sitting in a row behind a retaining wall just below the top of a thirty foot bluff; Credit, Bonnie,

Jason and Paul. At one time in the past this spot had probably been a room, but it was no longer maintained. Not only was the wall in front of them crumbling, but the dugout hillside behind them was also partially collapsed.

In front and below them ran a narrow, shallow creek. The clear water flowed over the bedrock, never more than a foot deep anywhere. The area was pretty much devoid of any vegetation. There were only a few clumps of grass and three palm trees along this entire section of creek. On either side, the gravel ground sloped up fairly steeply, although not so much that a man could not climb it if need be. At the far end, the creek exited through a narrow, steep ravine.

At that end of the canyon, approximately two hundred feet away, sat a group of five bound men. Two of them were dressed in camouflage fatigues. The other three were in simple mid-eastern clothing. Two guards with automatic weapons watched over them. The prisoners seemed apathetic or lethargic. One of the guards sat on a rock.

Across the creek from them, a ten or twelve year old boy was digging clay out of the side of the hill with a hand tool and piling it next to the stream.

Music from a loud speaker and other village sounds drifted in and out from the near distance behind them. Insects buzzed the area. It was a hot, dry, sunny day.

“Our timing could not have been better,” Paul whispered.

“I know one thing,” Credit said as he observed a cluster of lines. “You sure have a knack for picking the power spots.”

“It seems to work out that way, doesn’t it?”

“Where are we?” Bonnie asked.

“Persia,” Paul answered.

“Iran,” Jason whispered to Bonnie.

“Yes. I forget sometimes,” Paul smiled. “Watch the boy closely,” he continued, “but stay here. Do not project your awareness towards them.”

“Who are the prisoners?” Credit asked.

“I’d say that two of them are NATO or American soldiers. My guess is that the others were found to be collaborators. Shush. Just watch.”

The boy had finished digging his clay. He squatted next to the creek and with a mixture of clay, water and saliva, began forming figurines with his hands. He worked very fast and within a matter of minutes had expertly formed thirty or forty pieces that he lined up in several rows.

When he had completed his task, he lowered his head and continued to squat there, apparently meditating. At one point, Credit thought he may have fallen asleep, but as he watched, the boy suddenly lifted his head, stared in their direction for a moment or two, and then let his head down once again.

Within moments, an Imam in long flowing robes and a turban descended from the hillside with long, quick strides. He was an imposing figure, a young man, probably in his twenties.

The prisoners had suddenly become very attentive. They sat up straight and assumed their best behavior.

The Imam took notice of what the boy had accomplished. He stopped on that side of the creek and paced back and forth in front of the prisoners, barking orders, and waving his arms.

“I wish I knew what he was saying,” Credit whispered.

“He just told the prisoners that their time on this planet has grown very short,” Jason said.

“Your son has a gift,” Paul explained. “Not only is he a great teacher with young kids, but he also has a knack for language. He is a quick learner with a brilliant mind.”

“Paul taught me the trick,” Jason whispered. “I learned to speak Farsi a couple of weeks ago. I’ve polished my Spanish, and I’ve also learned Uto-Aztecian dialects.”

“The Hopi tongue?”

“Yes.”

“Chinese and Mayan dialects are up next.”

“Good luck.”

Credit looked at his son with admiration.

“The Imam is now talking to the American soldiers. He says they have no business coming from halfway around the world to kill innocent women and children. He says that when you bring death, you receive death. He says they are dupes. They kill because they think they are defending freedom or some other noble concept, when in actuality they are nothing more than slaves and lackeys of fat bankers and soulless business men that rob people and drain the life from the Earth. And now, since they did not think they needed to think for themselves, to free themselves from their masters and live their own lives, they would soon die a very painful death.”

The Imam continued to pace while the boy continued to squat with his head bowed, appearing to notice nothing.

“He is now talking to the two men in the brown vests. He says they are brave, honorable men, but their loyalties are misguided and misplaced, and for that they have to be made an example of.”

The Imam stopped and pointed at the last man.

“Oh, man,” Jason said. “He’s really giving it to ole chubby, there. He’s called him a fat, slovenly, traitorous pig, among other things, that deserves to die a thousand

deaths. He should be stood up in the town square and carved away piece by piece, bled to a slow and torturous death. He says he should be thankful that he was brought here.”

The fat man began to whimper. He dropped to his knees, causing the other prisoners to momentarily lose their balance.

“Mahdi! Mahdi!” he whined.

“Oh, geez,” Jason said as the man began to plead and cry. “The piece of shit is begging for his life, blaming everyone but himself. I’m not even going to begin to translate this. I think you all get the gist.”

The Imam suddenly turned from the prisoners. He glared in the direction of the wall for an instant, and then said something to the boy. Jason could not hear what was said. The Imam then gave the guards some orders and once again spoke to the prisoners.

“He told the guards to unbind the men. He told the prisoners that if they have prayers they want to say, they best get at it.”

Once they were set free, the two honorable Muslim men dropped to their knees facing in the same direction. They put their head to the ground and began to pray out loud. Jason did not try to interpret their appeals to their God.

The other Muslim continued to whine and beg.

The two Americans stood there quietly and looked around nervously.

The boy had finally come alive. He dropped to his knees, took saliva from his mouth with his hand, and wiped it on each of his figurines. When the boy had finished with his anointment, the Imam dropped to his knees, said a quick prayer, and then breathed heavily on each row of clay figures. His breath appeared heavy, almost liquid. There was a flicker of movement in the figurines. Within moments, a clear buzzing sound arose. It continued to grow louder, as if a hornet's nest had been disturbed, and then Credit and the others saw the figures rise into the air and begin to swarm.

The prisoners looked terrified. They scattered like rabbits.

One of the Americans lunged for the Imam but was swatted down by the guard. He was immediately swarmed upon by several of the flying clay figurines, as was the guard. The buzzing insects did not distinguish between them. They were stinging both men profusely. Blood curdling screams emanated from their lungs. Their bodies twisted and turned, jumping spasmodically. And then they both became still.

The stinging action seemed to drain the flying creatures. Once they had released their poison, they also seemed to lose their life force. They fell to the ground, dying quickly and easily.

The same scenario played out simultaneously with each of the prisoners and the other guard as they tried to run and escape from the horror. Terror and screaming

filled the air. The flying creatures caught them on the hillsides and stung the life out of them. And then the creatures themselves fell from the air, dead.

The last of the prisoners, the fat, slovenly one, had run towards Credit and the others. He had almost made it to their retaining wall when he was caught and swarmed upon. Welts arose upon his skin where he was stung. His skin blistered and blood gushed from the wound. His deafening, agonizing screams pierced their ears. He rolled backward and then lost control of his body movements, flopping spasmodically down the hill. And then he lay still.

Credit and the others had been given the opportunity to get an up close look at the clay figures. About the size of a fist, they had a human face, a bird's body, and a scorpion's tail. Each face was distinctly its own. But as soon as the creatures released their poison, it was as if the life force was drained from them, and they fell from the air.

“The Imam and the boy are getting better at putting life into the clay figurines. The last time I saw this, they did not live long enough to sting anyone,” Paul stated. “If they can extend the lives of the creatures, or get them to breed, the world will be in for a terrible time.”

They all turned to look back at the Imam and the little boy, and they saw that they were staring back in their direction. They felt apprehensive as they watched the Imam move over and stand behind the boy. Their bodies seemed to blend into one another, to merge. They became elongated like the shaman figures Paul had

drawn upon the mesa wall, although they were much taller and seemed exceedingly more powerful. A nuclear fire arose up from within them. It surrounded the pair, seemingly contained within an invisible cylinder immediately around them; a billowing, red and orange gaseous heat that continuously increased in fury, pressure and intensity.

“I don’t like this,” Paul whispered nervously.

And then the pulsating inferno suddenly exploded and leapt towards the wall, a turbulent fireball whose velocity increased exponentially as it approached.

Paul hit Jason and Jason disappeared. He then leapt quickly at Credit and Bonnie.

“Get out!” he shouted furiously.

Bonnie and Credit were gone before either the fireball or Paul could reach them.

47 Copper Canyon

Credit and Bonnie were lying on their sides next to each other, their foreheads touching. Their eyes popped suddenly open. Sweat covered their faces.

“Whoa!” Credit said.

“Everything has changed,” Bonnie muttered.

*

Three thousand miles away, Jason sat up in bed and looked across the dark room.

Paul Hanaver was nowhere to be seen.

*Life is a gift
You never asked for it
It's a river in time
A mountain to climb
Laws to be observed
Lessons to be learned
And your goal stands clear
It's to reach the peak
It's to stretch your strand of time
Into eternity*

*--excerpt from the Songs of Long Road
by C.L. Walker--*