



**Walk the Dark:  
Bonesongs for Apocalypse in D-Minor**

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**Dedication:**

To Janis Joplin. Just 'cause.

## Introduction

*Dear reader:*

*Gathered together here are a number of my favorite nightmares, turned out nicely for your enjoyment. You might call this collection of offerings “Pandora’s Toybox” – keeping in mind that the original’s last gift to the world was hope. Like a cross between a box of See’s Candy and Australia, it contains scattered poisons with occasional chances of beauty.*

*To paraphrase Alice Cooper, welcome to my nightmares!*

*It’s not all bad, though . . .*

*Trump XIII of the Tarot, Death, is considered to be a scary card. And after all, why shouldn’t it be scary? It represents Scorpio, the realm of Hades, Lord of Death.*

*But Scorpio is also the realm of transformation, transmutation, regeneration, renewal, and, ultimately, resurrection and redemption. It governs mass extinctions – and the rapid, astonishing radiation into extremely biodiverse new life that comes after them. It governs fungi, without which we would have no bread, beer, or cheese, and detritivores, without which bodies of dead creatures would pile up and up until the Earth was smothered with them. It governs the airless voids of outer space – and the endless possibilities for wealth and expansion that space offers Earthly life. It governs cast-off things – and the recycling thereof into new products, new life, and new possibilities.*

*In the midst of life, we are in death. In the midst of death, we are in life. Death is birth and new beginnings. And Life . . . is horror turned inside-out.*

*What follows are creations dedicated to Life, its dark side as well as its bright one.*

*Please come walk the dark with me.*

## 1. Rosebud

*O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,*

*Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

– William Blake

## Chapter 1: Songs of Innocence

*Little Lamb, who made thee?*

– William Blake, from “The Lamb”

Whenever I can, I take long, long walks alone through the byways, fields, and woods around my home. I live in the suburbs of Santa Reál, California, a smallish city in the South Coast strip connecting Ventura and Santa Maria. In Santa Reál, a short walk or, at worst, an easy afternoon’s bicycle-ride will get you well away from the urban sprawl and into regions approaching wilderness. So during my walks I can escape all the invasions, alarms, and excursions of city life and get away to places where I can hear myself think – which is as much a matter of necessity for me as it is pleasure.

I’m a writer, you see. I need a lot of time alone, without any interruptions or distractions, to work out some of the knottier details of plot, characterization, or other aspects of a story I’m currently writing, or hash over the hows and wherefores of some article or essay I’ve been asked to write for this magazine or that journal. On my walks I can find the privacy and peace I need for this – and rarely can any other time.

I live on Camarillo Street, over on the southwest side of the city. My house is about three blocks from Fairchild Elementary School, which is right on the city’s western border, next to the semi-wilderness of fields and woods that hedges the city there. The school’s immediate neighborhood is a very nice residential area, upper-middle class/Yuppie classic, with large two-story homes intermingled with townhouses, sprawling ranch houses, \$120,000 “cottages,” and all the other gorgeous homes, big and small, I’d never in my wildest dreams be able to afford. Nevertheless window-shopping is one of the great pleasures of my life; so often on the way to the fields during my walks I stroll through that area, past the school, wistfully daydreaming of The House, modeled on some of the larger, more awesomely priced houses near the school – the one I’ll get when I’ve finally worked out all my bad karma, about three Ghidrillion incarnations from now, and can get some of the *real* goodies instead of the cheapies and freebies I have to pretend now are truly the best things in life.

Several months ago, I decided to take a walk through that area, past Fairchild Elementary, on my way to the fields beyond. It was Saturday, mid-morning of a lovely Summer day. I set out feeling marvelous. The warm sunshine was interwoven with a cool, iodine-y breeze of the nearby ocean to make an endless, endlessly unwinding bolt of silken delight brushing seductively against the bare skin of arms, face, legs. The homes along the streets I followed were nearly all landscaped with almost obscenely brilliant, riotously abundant flowers, shrubs, and trees of every description, many of them, like the flowers, descended from ancestors originally imported into this country from the most unlikely places. (Someday, maybe a million

years from now, when civilization once more begins to arise out of radioactive ashes, the cockroach paleobotanists try their damndest to reconstruct the evolutionary history of our planet from the record of the rocks, just like we do today. But when they begin digging up the plastic-cruded rubble of Santa Reál, they will all have nervous breakdowns trying to figure out how in *hell* Sudanese gorse-bushes, sub-Saharan cacti, Yukon *prima flora*, and English tea-roses all managed not only to establish themselves here, but to flourish on such a scale that they were all able to produce thousands and thousands of varieties and sports!)

The city limits coincide on the west with the western boundary of Fairchild Elementary School. By some miracle, the land beyond for about half a mile is completely undeveloped. The school itself faces away from the fields, which come right up to its back boundaries. The land on which it sits is partially fenced, but for about fifty feet each way from place where they intersect, its south and west boundaries are completely open to the land beyond. Only a few low shrubs mark the place where the tamed, zoned piece of land belonging to the school district meets relatively wild country. The exception is a stand of several oleander bushes right at the southwest corner of the school-yard. Every Spring these put forth gigantic clusters of glorious white, electric pink, cerise and scarlet blossoms in vast profusion, enormous cloaks flaunted by the bushes to set the style of the season. Now that it was Summer, most of the chromatic riot they had incited was gone, dispersed in dying, brown, rotted shreds which, poor ghosts, did not even hint of the fantastic, splendid beauties of the season just past, of which they were only the necrotic revenants. A lone yew, rooted at the exact place where the southern and eastern sides of the school-yard met, accompanied the oleanders.

A well-trod footpath runs across the city limits and into the fields along the southern edge of the school-yard, right next to its border. At the time, this path was bordered by luxuriant grass, for the winter and most of the spring just past had been far wetter than average. I decided to follow it out to the fields.

Walking across the far edge of someone's front yard to get to it from the sidewalk, I inadvertently trod upon the numerous herbs growing all about, largesse from the previous season's rains; the fleeting, succulent odors of young sage, rosemary, rue, and countless others which I unthinkingly crushed underfoot in my passage tantalized my palate. The breeze had set such that all the smog from U.S. 101, which ran along the south side of the city, was carried out to sea rather than toward my part of town, and the air was exquisitely clean and fresh. I felt much, much younger than my forty-plus years as I made my way along the southern boundary of the school-yard.

I was just coming abreast of the group of oleanders that guarded the corner of the school-yard when I heard a small voice singing contentedly to itself, so softly it was almost whispering. The words it sang, coming to me as clearly on the light breeze coming from the voice's owner straight toward me, froze me in my tracks:

“Bidge-ee . . . bidge-ee . . . hoooo-reeeee . . .  
Dir-dee . . . bay-bee bidge-ee . . .  
Hoo-ree . . . bay-bee . . .  
Bay-bee bidge!”

sang the voice, to the tune of “Ring Around the Rosy.”

Not quite able to believe I had really heard it, I unfroze enough to tip-toe closer to the bushes which hid the singer from my view as quietly as my hole-y old sneakers allowed. I succeeded in doing so undetected; in fact, I could probably have marched in their with the U. S. Marine Corps Band playing “Stars & Stripes Forever” and not have been noticed by the singer who, completely oblivious to my presence, went right on singing:

“Dir-dee bay-bee hooo-ree,  
Stooo-pid bay-bee fuck-ee,  
Bidge-ee, fuck-ee,  
Bay-bee *HORE!*”

sang the voice, ending the last line somewhat more emphatically than the rest of its song.



Appalled, I tiptoed around the side of the nearest oleander and peeked into the pan of school-yard dirty which the oleanders enclosed, terrified of being spotted by whoever was singing – though why, I couldn't say: that voice couldn't have belonged to anyone – or *anything* much heftier than Tinkerbell.

I needn't have worried. The owner of the voice, deep in that awesome, laser-like concentration that only young children, saints, adepts, and the totally mad can achieved, remained completely oblivious to me as she sat and crooned softly to herself. She sat there on the ground, her profile toward me, legs stuck straight out before her in the manner of very young children, whispering her song to herself as she scratched at the dirt between her legs, eyes closed, concentrating intently on something deep in the middle of her skull, a small, Lovecraftian version of a Hindu holy-man at his meditations.

At first I estimated her age as about three or four, in spite of her great size and the weird, hard note in her voice that crept silently along under the words and notes of the song. But at last the proportions of her arms, legs, and torso, all wrong for a small child, managed to shout through my befuddlement that she could have been no less than seven or eight years old.

She had very long, glossy, black hair hanging down her back like an ink-fall, obviously carefully and lovingly brushed earlier that morning. She wore a blue-and-white checked gingham outfit with a white apron, short sleeves, and a little unpleated, ruffly, blue-and-white-checked skirt that came to about her knees. On a child of five or so it would have been darling. On one her size and age it looked bizarre, like a Barbie Doll dressed in snuggies.

“Dir-da bay-ba hooo-ra . . .  
Nas-ta bay-ba fug-gaaa . . .  
Bidja, bidja,  
Bay-ba *fug* . . .”

she sang. Then, with hardly a pause, she switched to another song, this one to the tune of “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad”:

“Bidg-ee, bidg-ee, bidg-ee *HOR*-ee,  
Fug-ee bay-bee bidge . . .”

Now I stepped out quietly from behind the oleander to see what she was doing. Her concentration never wavered; she remained completely oblivious to me, so absorbed was she in whatever she was doing. Curious to see just what it was that required such horrendously powerful concentration, I looked at her hands, scrabbling busily before her in the dirt.

At first I'd thought she was making designs in the dirt with something, a child's equivalent of the sort of doodling adults do when talking on the telephone or at a committee meeting. But her fingers weren't touching the dirt. They made odd patterns in the air just above it, as if she were simultaneously making a cat's-cradle out of thin air and pretending to practice on some strange musical instrument. Her blissfully unawareness of anything in the world beyond her closed eyelids made me bolder, and I stepped farther out to get a closer look.

She sat on the ground, leaning back slightly, legs making a V before, with her busy hands, like two big white spastic, amputee spiders, held out stiffly before her, close to the dirt. It suddenly hit me that the dance which those hands were engaged in was a highly stylized if jazzy parody of masturbation – masturbation carried out several inches away from her genitalia or, indeed, any other part of her body, performed solely upon the air. And beyond that, woven into the hands' eerie dance were flourishes and clutching gestures suggesting strangling, the gesticulations of heated political debates, the cruel confidence of the born tyrant, the will-to-power of a trial-sized Caligula.

For a timeless moment, I watched the dance of her hands in aghast silence. Those hands moved with a controlled precision that was literally impossible in anyone her age. The vision of a master surgeon or a concert pianist trapped in a little girl's body, gone crazy from such imprisonment and weaving bedlam Magicks in the air, came back to me. And now back she went to her original song:

“Dir-dee . . . bid-jed-ee hooo-ree . . .  
Fild-zee bay-bee bid-jee . . .”

Fuck-ee . . . fuck-ee . . .  
Mom-eez-a hooore . . .”

I never made a sound, or moved at all – in fact, I had been unconsciously holding my breath all the time I was watching her – but the girl suddenly stopped what she was doing, opened her eyes, and looked straight at me as if she’d known all along that I was there. She smiled, a carnal, cruel smile that contained all the knowledge of an old, jaded prostitute and none of the wisdom. Her hazel eyes glowed with spots of burning sulfur. “Filts-ee *hor-ee*,” she said conversationally, as someone else would say “Good morning.”

“Who – who are you?” I asked her lamely, stumbling over my words in sheer shock.

Lazily, with the economical ease of a healthy predator, the little girl climbed to her feet. Suddenly the thousand-year old jade in a child’s body vanished. In her place was The Idiot: the girl’s eyes became wetly glazed and distorted, turning in different directions, their color going a lightning-shot gray-blue. Her mouth gaped slackly in a wide, vacant, drooling smile of complete imbecility; she spraddled her legs, which ended in little black patent-leather shoes, so that they were splayed wide apart on a vertical plane, just as they had been on a horizontal one while she had been seated on the ground. She held her arms out straight to the sides from her shoulders, her open hands turned palms-out towards me, the fingers spread out widely. Bent over slightly toward me from the waist, her body wove and wobbled as if her sense of balance were defective. She began to rotate her hands back and forth on her wrists, weaving her body from side to side in spastic, greasy bends and shudders. “*My name ith Debby!*” she simpered in a spittle-shot, baby-girl voice burdened with a pronounced lisp.

“Debby –”

Now her idiot-child pose began to slowly mutate into more and more elaborate and complex behavior. Putting the forefinger of her left hand to her lips, she pulled out the hem of her dress with her right hand in an archaic sort of half-curtsy. She began to blink her eyes frantically, the lashes going up and down like insect wings; behind her finger her mouth opened and closed in a drool-rimmed doll-gape, her red, red lips shiny with saliva. Her eyes went huge and glistened strangely. A trembly, ingenuous, utterly phony smile spread across her face. Her whole seeming was a terrible parody of a small, emotionally crippled, socially backward, badly cowed child in an agony of anxious need for acceptance by the adults around her, trying her best to present herself as winningly and disarmingly as possible. For a minute or two the horrible caricature went on and on.

Then, as suddenly as she’d first assumed the idiot act, she forsook it for another, that of a supremely confident, poised little being whose eyes were hard and cold as reptiles’ are supposed to be, but aren’t anywhere outside of badly-researched fiction. “What do you want?” she demanded of me with peremptory hauteur.

“Do you live around here?” It was all I could think of to say.

“Who has to tell *you*?” Then she changed again. This time I was treated to a performance of The Loon, jaw askew, vapid grin, eyes rolling, limbs going every which way. “Duhhhh . . .” And, mouth agape in another version of the Idiot Smile, she hawked up a tremendous wad of phlegmy mucus with a vile, tearing rasp and spat copiously in my direction. I jumped just in time. “Now *look here* –” I started to roar at her.

In yet another of those lightning-quick changes, she turned back into The Idiot once more. “I bet *your* Mom-ee’s a *hooooor*,” she told me, smiling ingenuously at me, her eyes pools of brainless malice.

“Oh, *Deeeeeee*-bby!” a voice called from behind me somewhere, mercifully interrupting this Cook’s mini-tour of Hell. At the sound of that voice, the little girl underwent one more instantaneous, startling transformation, the last I was to see that day. Between one point of time and the next she turned into a more or less normal little girl (except for that too-short, Dorothy-from-Kansas gingham dress and frilly white pinafore), completely composed, as if the past few minutes hadn’t taken place at all. “Yes, Mommy?” she called demurely to whoever it was that was coming up behind me.

## Chapter 2: What So Rare

*I happy am.*

*Joy is my name.*

– William Blake, from “Infant Joy”

I turned. Coming toward us along the same path I’d come here by was a handsome woman in early middle age, dressed in a very conventional white shell top, blue skirt, and white sandals. She smiled pleasantly at me. She seemed rather weary, and there were white roots in her otherwise luxuriant, short, auburn hair. “Oh, *there* you are!” she exclaimed upon seeing Debby, relief and concern filling her voice, “Baby, where have you *been*? You *know* we’ve got to go to the dentist now! – “Hi,” she said, turning to me. “I’m Sarah Rotberg. We live over there, on Las Aceitunas, you know, near the corner of Montaigne . . .” She waved vaguely back in the direction of the homes near the school. “I hope Debby hasn’t been bothering you –?”

She seemed very kind, a compact, pleasant woman who could have been an executive in a local company, perhaps, or a staff or faculty member- out at UCSR, the local campus of the University of California, about ten miles west of here, next to Golightly and Ano Vista. Though she was very attractive, nevertheless there were crow’s-feet of chronic weariness and worry around her eyes and mouth. I wasn’t about to do her the ugly favor of telling her what her daughter had been up to just a minute before – assuming, of course, that it hadn’t all been just some horrible hallucination on my part. “Oh, not at all – in fact, I was just taking a walk along the path here, going over to the field –” I pointed – “and got here just a minute or two ago. – Uh, I’m Linda. Linda Cutter. I live back there, over on Camarillo Street.” I offered my hand. She accepted it, shaking my hand warmly.

“Well, I’ve just come to get Debby,” she told me. “We’re going to the dentist for a cleaning, and it’s nearly time to go. She loves to play over here on weekends . . .” She seemed so terribly apologetic, though entirely unaware of what I had just stumbled over on my morning stroll. It was as if constant apologizing had become sheer habit for her. She went on, unnecessarily explaining in a nervously controlled calm: “So I thought I’d come here to see if she were here – and she was – well, I *am* glad to meet you!”

“Yeah, it’s nice to meet my neighbors. I’m still getting to know people here – I moved here from Golightly about a year ago, and I haven’t really net everybody here yet. – Uh, I’ve got to get going . . .” Not that I had anything to do, really, but I wanted to get out to those fields, away from this little corner of Hell, so badly now that I could taste it.

“Oh, of course! I didn’t mean to keep you!” she said graciously. “Come on, Debby,” she said, turning to her daughter. “We’ve got to go.”

An odd look crossed Debby’s face, as if she were trying to make a decision as momentous as Truman’s concerning whether or not to nuke Japan. For a fleeting moment, an ancient, rage-crazed wolverine looked out of her hazel eyes, but her Polite Child mask never quite cracked. Finally she said, with studied politeness, “Yes, Mommy.” Her mother put out her hand; Debby took it, eyes downcast. Heaving an enormous sigh of relief, Mrs. Rotberg headed back toward the tract east of the school, her daughter dutifully accompanying her.

I felt as if all the last twenty minutes or so had been an evil dream from which I was just now awakening. That child *had* to have been a figment of my imagination! Only the two sets of footprints in the dirt of Debby and her mother testified that the whole hideous episode had been something more than just a nightmare or hallucination. At least, a child had actually been here, in this playground, and I had encountered her and, a few minutes later, her mother. But a 7-year old child, talking and acting like the nightmare vision I’d just had? Sure – such things were common in horror movies and the more sensational best-sellers. Writers from Taylor Caldwell to whatever turkeys wrote *The Omen* and *The Bad Seed* had made obscenely opulent fortunes on the public’s appetite for scapegoats, especially archetypal “evil children,” who very clearly served as a means of rationalizing harsh methods of child-raising and the sort of pedophobia that made so many cultures, particularly America and Europe, so prone to child-abuse and other forms of violence. The idea that, just incidentally, there might really be children who fit those caricatures was a little too fantastic to credit – and just too convenient as a “justification” of the sort of “poisonous pedagogy” about which the marvelous Alice Miller has written so movingly in her *tours de force* on the psychodynamic ravages inflicted upon children by child-abuse, neglect, and even just highly negative attitudes about children as that are integral parts of the cultural dynamics of many societies, such as she

describes in her tremendous introduction to the subject, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*. . . . No, if anything, I'd had some sort of temporary psychotic break, projecting on to a poor little girl some of the nasty garbage still down there in my own unconscious mind as a result of having grown up and lived all my life in just such a society.

I shook myself, trying unsuccessfully to throw off the vast depression that had fallen on me, a leaden weight that alternately went hot and cold and had grown spurs, one of which had thrust its venomous shaft deep into my psyche like a poisoned dagger. The mood stayed with me the rest of the day, spoiling it entirely.

### Chapter 3: Omens

*To see a World in a grain of sand,  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And Eternity in an hour.*

– Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

I took a few walks during the next week, but I avoided that part of town entirely where Fairchild Elementary was. The following Saturday came and went, along with Sunday and Monday. Then Tuesday came, and with it one of the loveliest mornings I've ever seen in Santa Reál.

A vision of the fields on the west side of town overwhelmed me. I remembered the lush birdsong that poured from the air there on fair days, along with early summer's honeyed light and sweet winds. It was a relatively unspoiled area, rather rare, these days, near any city in Southern California, all but extinct near Los Angeles, where I had grown up. I yearned for its fragile wildness, so strange to find near city limits. If any important fragments of memory of the Saturday before last lingered in my mind, the loveliness of the day must have pushed them entirely out of my mind, and I decided to take my walk out to the fields that day.

In fact, it was such an extravagantly beautiful day that I decided to make a regular hike of it, carrying a picnic lunch and some books in a rucksack and hitching a canteen of water to my belt. I thought of doing a bicycle jaunt over the bike trails to UCSR and back along the cliffs above the ocean, and almost decided to take the bicycle instead of going on foot. But I really wanted a walk, though I would have liked to see the view of the ocean from the cliffs, and the grounds of the University, too. So I finally decided to hike as far as I could through the fields to the bike trail that ran along the other side of the freeway, then walk along the trail until I'd gone about as far as I could and still be able to walk back home again without too much discomfort. That way, I could have the best of both worlds. So I made up a lunch and put it, a jacket, put some books in my backpack, filled my canteen, put on jeans, shirt and boots, and left for the fields, feeling on top of the world.

The walk outward was lovely. I passed a red foxkit on my way past the school-yard; he darted over a nearby hillock, then crept back up to watch me from behind its cover, where I could barely see him out of my peripheral vision. And when I hit the bike-trail over just beyond the freeway, I was oddly thrilled when I heard the muted *bzzzzz* of a rattler – I hadn't seen one since I was a kid, at the Los Angeles Griffith Park Zoo, where I had seen one in a glassed-in habitat in the Reptile House there, and I'd never encountered a wild one. Since I was wearing good hiking-boots, and, from the sound of its rattled warning, was nowhere near the snake's probable position, I had no fear of being bitten by it. After all, this was very early July, not August or September, when the heat of late summer socked in hard and the snake would be shedding its skin, a time when rattlers, normally quite shy of human beings, become blind, maniacally bad-tempered, and belligerent to the point of suicide. The animal that I had just heard was no danger to me. And to find so archetypally wild a creature right inside the city limits of a modern Southern California city, with all its automobile traffic and other hazards against which the legless, temperature-dependent animals have no

defenses whatsoever save luck, seemed a good omen.

Later on, when I came across a picnic bench at the edge of the cliff, over near the ocean, I was not so pleased when, stooping down to peer up at the underside of the benches and table to see whom I'd be sharing my lunch-table with, I found two big, fat black widow spiders, one at each end of the bench upon which I'd planned to sit. Irrationally I shuddered. Fragments of Robert Frost's poem "Design" momentarily breached into the light of my conscious mind, then once again plunged back to the whatever depths of the Unconscious they had come from.

Unhappily, I found a stick and knocked the spiders off the bench. I didn't want to risk upsetting one of them by my intrusion into her territory, and just possibly getting bitten by her, if I sat on top of the bench under which she denned. On the other hand, I don't like killing anything, even for food, or in self-defense, and I wasn't sure this even qualified for the latter category. But the ground was far too hillocky and burr-strewn to sit on, not to mention the presence of a regular Shriner's Convention of ants close by, and I very badly needed to sit down and rest at that point, anyway.

Finally, I settled on a compromise: I found a stick with leaves at one end, and used it to brush the animals out onto the ground rather than squashing them, and hoped I hadn't injured them in the process. After all, black widows do trap and kill many, many times their weight in various kinds of flies and other vermin during their lives. So many spiders are becoming scarce because they're being killed off by the insecticides and various other artificial poisons with which human beings are so liberally seasoning their prey, not to mention the rest of the environment; the toxins became highly concentrated as they were passed up the food-chain via predation until, finally, the prey of many spiders and other animals becomes absolutely deadly to anything that eats it. I didn't have the heart to add two more of the useful little horrors to the casualty list. So I met the problem halfway and did what I could to spare them as well as making sure they wouldn't return the favor by giving me a nasty bite.

The rest of my hike out and most of the way back was uneventful. Bird-song cheered me, and the warmth of the Sun comforted me, and I made a long day of it, to get as much good out of the day as I could. It was not far from sunset when finally, returning home, I passed the fields west of town and came down along the path that led by Fairchild Elementary's school-yard on my way home.

The day was coming to a close. Already, a firestorm of light filled the West, all flame-reds, chrome-greens, aqua-blues, and brilliant incandescent washes of orange and yellow. In the distance I could hear a woman calling, "*Deh-bee! Oh, Deh-beee!*" It sounded like Mrs. Rotberg, her voice sharp-edged with alarm. I wondered if I would encounter her daughter somewhere on my way home, playing in the warm summer evening. I devoutly hoped not; it had taken me more than a day to shake off the leaden, razor-taloned depression which the first chance meeting with her had brought on. The note of concern in Mrs. Rotberg's voice didn't strike any echoes from me; Debby was probably just playing somewhere and had forgotten the time. Her mother was sure to find her soon.

Here was the school-yard yew tree, and the oleanders, coming up on my left.

I happened to glance to the side, where there was a gap between the bushes –

It took me a few moments to realize that the racketing scream that seemed to come at me from everywhere at a deafening volume was coming from my own throat. Stunned to the bones of my soul by what lay there, I stood by the oleanders and stared down at a scene out of some million-dollar splatter-film, one that might have been directed by Hieronymus Bosch and produced by Dante Alighieri, a banquet of horror spread out lavishly before me in the corner of the school-yard, nicely framed by the bushes. The corpse of a woman lay sprawled on the ground next to one of the oleanders. A great, gaping tear had opened her throat, and her life's blood was puddled copiously on the ground underneath and around her body, and dripping from the leaves of near-by bushes. From the way she lay, and the disarray of her limbs, it looked as if her death had been a hideously hard one. The fact that there was blood on more than one of the bushes testified that she'd thrashed about wildly in the short time it had taken for her to lose enough blood to pass out and fall to the ground.

In addition to the blood from her throat that covered her lower jaws, throat and upper body, there was a gigantic splash of blood reaching from her lower abdomen, across her crotch, to the middle of her thighs. It had come from a tremendous, ragged hole in her lower abdomen, slashed right through the fabric of the violet, white-striped jogging-shorts she wore. Like her lilac tank-top, her shorts were so soaked with blood in most places that it was hard to see what color they had originally been.

The dead woman had been youngish, probably in her thirties, judging from her build. She had been slender, with good tennis muscles. There was no telling if she had been pretty or not; something had carved away her left eye, her nose and her lips, and slashed huge chunks out of the rest of her face. There was still one large, hoopy earring in her left earlobe, but judging from the nasty tear in the other, whose edges, like the left side of her jaw, next to it, were covered with gore, something or someone had ripped away the earring on the right without bothering to unfasten it first. In addition, the ring finger of her left hand had been chopped off at the first joint; if it had borne any rings, they were gone now.

The corpse's modishly cut hair was filled with blood; in the dying sunset light it was impossible to tell what its actual color was underneath the blood with which it was soaked through. The L.A. Gear jogging-shoes she'd been wearing were the only articles of clothing she'd had on which weren't soaked with blood. Between the blood on her body and the blood on the ground and the leaves of the bushes, I could hardly believe it had all come out of just this one, medium-sized woman, who couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds or so, and who must have been an inch or two shorter than my own 5'5". It looked as if someone had slaughtered a herd of elephants in there, not just one, relatively small human being.

That was bad enough. What nearly destroyed my tottering sanity was the sight of little Debby Rotberg, dressed like any normal little girl in a Southern California summer in a white T-shirt sporting a picture of the crew of the Star Trek *Enterprise* and a pair of red shorts, lying sprawled out on the ground beside the corpse, happily nuzzling first at the horrible wound in the dead woman's throat, then at the blood that had puddled in the one in the woman's lower belly, then back at her throat again. All the while she was drinking from the clotting fountain of what had been the woman's life, she scrabbled with her right hand either at the corpse's crotch or her own. Suddenly the child, who was sitting on the ground next to the corpse, sat up, raised her arms skyward and, casting her head far back with her eyes closed, screamed, "*Bidge! Fuck! Hooore!*" in a voice like a crazy crow the size of a warehouse.

I gagged, almost strangling. Debby heard me. Instantly she came out of her trance. Her head whipped around, and I found myself staring into eyes like holes into a blast-furnace. Blood covered her face and throat from the neckline of her T-shirt nearly to her eyes. Lazily, she licked at the blood around her mouth. "*Fuck-ee,*" she said conversationally, grinning at me ferally as she finished slurping up the blood.

It was too much for me. My nerve broke. I turned and bolted away from there, toward the city and the houses lying just east of the school. As I ran, I heard shouts and pounding footsteps coming toward me. \*Oh, God, help me – help me!" I screamed as I ran on and on, fleeing from daymare.

## Chapter 4: Fetters for the Mind

*Love to faults is always blind,  
Always is to joy inclin'd,  
Lawless, wing'd, and unconfin'd,  
And breaks all chains from every mind.*

*Deceit to secrecy confin'd,  
Lawful, cautious, and refin'd;  
To every thing but interest blind,  
And forges fetters for the mind.*

Blake, from "Poems from the MSS"

"Debby?" came an answering voice, still half a block or more away.

A voice much closer to me, possibly the owner of the feet that were now pounding toward me, cried, "Who is it? What's wrong? Is the little girl there?"

"Oh, God – come quick! There's been – a woman's dead here!" I screamed.

Several people were coming toward me. The one in the lead was a young, male police officer, followed by Mrs. Rotberg and two other men. It was the police officer who'd called out to me, his cry like a bullet out of an M-16.

"Where?" yelled the policeman.

"Back this way – hurry!" I shouted at him, coming to an abrupt halt on the path and pointing back toward where I'd discovered Debby and the corpse.

"Where, lady? Show me!" He'd caught up with me now.

"Come on – this way!" I turned and ran back to where the corpse lay sprawled in the dirt beneath the oleander. He, Mrs. Rotberg and the others followed at a dead run.

When we reached the place where Debby and the corpse were, something had changed, but at first I couldn't tell what it was. Then I realized that Debby was no longer battenning on the corpse. Indeed, she was lying on the ground some distance away from it, crying wildly. Most of the blood was gone from her face and neck, and had been replaced by a great deal of dirt. The bottom of her T-shirt, however, was stiff with bloody mud. As we drew near to her, Debby began to scream. "Mommy! Mommy!" she shrieked. "Oh, Mommy, where are you?" She seemed terrified out of her mind. "Don't let them get me – *Mommy!*" Her screams became inarticulate, ear-splitting cries straight out of the Pit.

"Debby – oh, darling, what happened?" Her mother had finally caught up with me and the officer. Horror-stricken at what she found there, beside the oleanders, she ran to Debby's side, kneeling down beside her daughter. "Oh, darling –are you all right!" Debby's answer was more wild, panic screaming.

"Poor little girl," muttered the cop, shaking his head. "God -- what sort of monster could have done *this?*"

"Did you find the little girl?" asked one of the other two men, who'd finally caught up with the rest of us. A tallish, pleasant man with curly, graying hair, close to me in age, he was dressed in a kelly-green-and-white checked sports-shirt and lime-green chinos.

"Is Debby all right?" panted his companion, a balding, slightly paunchy older man dressed in tailored, light-weight gray slacks and a short-sleeved white shirt. Both his slacks and his shirt, which had been designed with the boardroom in mind, not a desperate run along streets and fields in hot Southern California summer weather, were heavily wrinkled, and decorated here and there with foxtails. Huge sweat-rings darkened his shirt under the arms. The tail of a crumpled red-and-gray striped power-tie dangled forlornly from one of the front pockets of his trousers, a casualty of the war between fashion and necessity.

Mrs. Rotberg moaned loudly, caught in an ecstasy of horror, clutching her screaming daughter tightly to her chest. Clearly she hadn't yet realized that the blood splattered everywhere wasn't Debby's. Rocking her daughter back and forth in her arms, she began to wail, a forlorn sound out of the remotest beginnings of humanity that sent icy lightning along my spine.

The policeman, who had quickly determined that the woman on the ground was now beyond all hope, turned to the woman and child. "Hey, is the little girl all right?"

Mrs. Rotberg, Debby coughing and sobbing helplessly in her arms, grief molding her face into a hag-mask, turned to the policeman. His eyes narrowed. "Uh . . . I don't think your kid's been hurt, ma'am," he said, at once understanding what was passing through Mrs. Rotberg's mind. "Put her down, let's take a look – I think she's all right."

Her face softening with unexpected hope, Mrs. Rotberg dumbly did as he asked. She and the officer checked the girl over. It wasn't long before they had determined that Debby hadn't been physically hurt at all, and that the blood that covered her wasn't her own. Solicitously, the policeman told Mrs. Rotberg, "She's got something on her face, I think, besides the mud – here, there's something on her mouth, let me clean it up . . ." Taking a spanking-clean linen handkerchief from a back pocket, carefully he wiped whatever it was from the girl's mouth. Briefly he looked at his handkerchief, then carefully folded it over on itself and tucked it into his shirt pocket. "There, I think that did it. – Okay, honey, you're going to be all right . . . there, that's a girl . . ."

The man wearing the sports-shirt asked, "Sarah, is Debby – is she --"

Mrs. Rotberg turned to him, tears filling her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. "Oh, my God, she's all right, my baby's all right . . ." Then she began weeping in relief, her sobs loud in the twilight, her tears spilling down her cheeks in a small river onto her daughter.

"Hadn't we better get her home?" he asked her.

“Sarah, what’s happened here? Will somebody please tell me what the hell’s going on here?” the balding man demanded, concerned and frustrated.

“Somebody’s been killed,” snapped the cop. “Debby’s here – she seems to be all right. Look, I’ve got to go radio for help – we’ve got a murder here, a really nasty one. Let’s get the kid back to your house, Mrs. Rotberg, and I’ll call the station and ask them to send somebody out here from the Special Investigations unit.”

“I -- oh, God, my baby’s all right!” wailed Mrs. Rotberg. Her relief at finding that her daughter was safe had momentarily all but paralyzed her.

“Uh -- Sarah, let me take Debby,” said the man with the sport shirt. “Let’s get her home and get her cleaned up.” Gently he patted Mrs. Rotberg’s back, making soothing noises. The balding man joined them, and the two men talked quietly for a few minutes with Mrs. Rotberg and each other. Then the first man took the child up in his arms and began walking back toward the housing tract. The shorter, balding one followed, his arm around the stumbling Mrs. Rotberg, telling her, “It’s all right, Sarah – Debby’s safe, and that’s all that matters, isn’t it? Let’s get back home and clean her up and put her to bed, and it’ll be all right, it’s all right . . .”

In the meantime, as Mrs. Rotberg and the two men that had come with her were gathering Debby up and preparing to head for the house, the officer wandered back toward the body and the nearby oleanders. He looked about for a moment, at first almost perfunctorily. Suddenly he paused, having spotted something. He knelt down by one of the oleander bushes, apparently to get a better look at whatever it was that had caught his eye. Then he cast about for a moment or two, as if looking for something he’d forgotten. Finally, taking his note-pad from his breast pocket, he tore off a sheet of paper and used it to pick up the something, a slender darkness against greater dark. He held onto whatever he had just found tightly, his knuckles white, his hands trembling a little with the intensity of his grip on it. Rising to his feet again, he stared after the others, who were far enough away by now that they were almost indistinguishable from their surroundings in the rapidly fading twilight. Shaking his head as if in pity, he turned to me.

“You a witness, lady?” the badly shaken young cop asked me.

“I -- yes. No. I mean, I found the body – I didn’t see how the . . . she’d been dead for a while, I think. I just found her with – with the, the girl . . .” I began to choke.

“Hey,” he said, concerned. “It’s all right. Come on – looks like you need to sit down and rest for a minute. Come on back with the rest of us – I’m going to have to ask you some questions, anyway, after I contact Homicide. We’ll go back to Mrs. Rotberg’s place, and you can probably get a drink of water there. – Or something stronger, if you need it.” Patting me on the back, he urged me gently along in the wake of the others.

The Rotberg’s did have “something stronger,” and I needed it. The man wearing the sport-shirt, it turned out, was Rabbi Benjamin Geller from Beth Miqlam Synagogue over at Main and Muir, where the Rotbergs went on Sabbath. An old friend of the Rotberg’s, he was very familiar with their house; it was he who sympathetically scared up a bourbon-and-water for me at the officer’s suggestion and my own, wiped-out nod of confirmation – Mrs. Rotberg herself was too busy cleaning up the still-screaming Debby and getting her ready for bed to do so herself.

The other man, the balding one in slacks and white shirt, was Bob Corning, the Rotbergs’ attorney, who, as it happened, had just dropped by to discuss something or other with Sarah Rotberg. Debby had been out playing somewhere when he’d arrived; as it got later and later and Debby still hadn’t come home, he’d offered to help Mrs. Rotberg look for her. As they were setting out to do just that, they’d met Rabbi Geller, out for a stroll – he lived only a couple of blocks away from the Rotbergs. He, too, had offered to help find Debby. After about an hour of searching, when it was getting close to sunset, and Mrs. Rotberg realized that her daughter had now been missing for almost eight hours, the three of them became alarmed and had called the police to ask for help looking for Debby. The Santa Reál City Police Department had sent out one officer, not thinking it was too serious a matter. When the officer arrived, he, Sarah, Rabbi Geller, and Bob Corning began searching together, now quite concerned. They were just coming toward the school-yard to search there when they heard my screams and came running to see what had happened.

Mr. Rotberg, whose first name was Bartholomew – everyone called him “Barry” – wasn’t home; he was in Seattle, on a business trip. Mrs. Rotberg hadn’t yet called him to let him know what had happened. It was probably just as well. There was little or nothing he could do from Seattle to help, anyway, and he’d have remain there until his current job as an engineering consultant to Boeing, working on plans for a new



space shuttle, was over, which wouldn't be for another week yet. It was probably better to wait at least until he was about ready to come home to tell him what had happened to his daughter. By then, the news couldn't interfere with his work, and Debby would probably be quite all right, anyway. So they had decided to wait to call him at least until the police had come and gone and everyone had had a good night's sleep. There was nothing he could do tonight, anyway, and by the time morning came, they'd all have a much better idea of what was going on, whether Debby was doing to be all right, and what she and her mother might need in the days to come.

The doorbell rang. It was the first of the detectives from the Special Investigations unit. Rabbi Geller let them in, and "our" officer went to greet them and acquaint them with the details of the case. As he did, he took out the handkerchief he'd used to wipe Debby's mouth with from his breast-pocket and handed it over to one of the newcomers, along with the paper-wrapped object he'd picked up in the school-yard and had held onto as if his life had depended upon it ever since. In low tones, he spoke with the other officer for a minute or so, the two of them withdrawing into a corner of the room to avoid being overheard.

Soon the house was filled with detectives from Special Investigations together with several paramedics, most of whom soon were on their way over to the school-yard to gather up the poor, torn body of the dead woman and investigate the site. Tom McKnight, the young officer who had been the first one after me to arrive at the scene, accompanied the investigative team that went out to gather evidence concerning the dead woman's murder, which had clearly been the cause of her death. In the meantime, two detectives who remained behind for that purpose began to question all us civilians about whatever knowledge we might have about the crime.

Because I had apparently been the first one at the scene, the detectives remaining behind at the house questioned me rather sharply, more so than anyone else. But there was no blood to be seen anywhere on me, not even the small traces and smears that would have been left by a quick attempt on my part to clean up before anyone could see me, had I been the one who had killed the dead woman. Moreover, a point that became important later, when the forensic investigation team that had gone out to investigate the murder-site returned with photographs of the area taken with a polaroid camera, I was wearing boots – whereas the prints surrounding the woman's body were clearly those of a pair of woman's sandals, the kind that aren't made for anything but city sidewalks, the work-place, or the beach, as opposed to the big, heavy clod-hoppers I had been wearing for my hike. Those two pieces of evidence alone made it virtually certain that I couldn't possibly have been the murderer, or even an accomplice to the woman's death.

Once they'd ascertained that, the detectives were much kinder to me. After taking my name, address, phone-number, and driver's-license number, and cautioning me that I would at least have to make a statement at some point and should let the police know if I had to leave town before all this was settled, they smiled a little and told me to relax and not to worry. Then they went on to question the others.

By that point, McKnight had come back to the house. Seeing me slumped exhausted in an easy-chair, he came over and looked down at me with concern. "Are you all right, Ms. Cutter?"

"I, uh, I guess so."

"Can I offer you a ride home?"

"Sure -- God, I just want to get home and go to sleep! -- Uh, sorry," I added with an embarrassed grin, after yawning hugely.

"Don't worry about it. Frankly, I just want to go home and get stoned out of my fucking *mind!*" Tom said, looking haggard.

My grin much broader than before, I told him, "Hey -- I won't tell anybody if you won't. -- Man, it must have been *bad* back there!"

"You oughtta know -- you found her first."

"My, so I did. A dubious distinction . . . Oh, well, never mind me. I'm -- a little out of it right now."

"Join the club, lady. Anyway, you want that ride?"

"Yeah, I could sure as hell use it about now. I am just all beat to sh-- er, wiped out."

"Okay. -- look, I'll go ask the lieutenant if they need anything else, then we'll go. How's that sound?"

"That sounds fine. Thanks -- I can't wait to get the hell out of here!"

"Don't worry about it." He went over to one of the detectives, who wore a suit and tie and looked very, very tired and very, very angry. They spoke together for a few minutes. Then the lieutenant nodded. Tom came back. "Sure. He says it's fine."

“Oh, thank God.” Creakily I rose to my feet. Tom led me out to his patrol car. We got in and he put the key into the ignition. Then he turned to me. “Are you sure you told the detectives everything?”

“Hunh? Yeah, why?”

“Well, I sort of listened to what you were telling them, some of it, anyway. You know, they ask their questions over and over again, about thirty times, to make sure they get the whole story down straight. You described the body, you told us about all the blood, what the wounds looked like – but where was the kid?” he asked me. Starting his car, he put it in gear and backed it down the driveway, into the street. We started off through the pleasant, well-lit streets of the tract, heading for my place, as he and I continued our conversation.

“You mean where was Debby?”

“Who else? Was there another kid there?”

“No, no, there wasn’t. She *was* there . . . what else?”

“What was she doing?”

“You saw her.”

“Yeah, I did. A pretty upset little kid – not that I blame her! And of course she couldn’t have killed that woman herself – God, those wounds were like something Hannibal the Cannibal would have done, or something. You know, wounds it would have taken a strong man with a large knife or something like that to inflict.

“– Only we didn’t find a man’s footprints around there, at all. All we saw, besides your boot-prints, were the prints of sandals – and not a man’s, iether. Smaller. Like a woman would wear. I’d give *anything* to get that kid to talk coherently about what happened out there – she *must* have seen *something*. Our only witness, and she’s too fucking – uh, sorry. Too out of it with shock to talk about it. So there we are. Stuck.

“I was just hoping she’d said something, maybe, that you heard her say, a clue of some kind. Wasn’t there *anything*?” Briefly he looked away from the road to look directly at me, searching my face, his blue-gray eyes staring into mine. Then, as quickly, he turned his attention back to his driving.

A great searing gray calm filled my mind when I tried to think of Debby at the murder-site. Who’d believe me if I described what I’d actually seen her doing out there? Hell, *I* didn’t believe it – so the cops would be sure to think it was some weird cover-story I’d made up to cover the fact I was the murderer myself, after all, or something. Why should I bother?

Finally, I shook my head and said, “No. Nothing. I’m sorry, I wish there had been something I could tell you, but there really wasn’t anything more than what I told the detectives back there. Oh, God, this is so horrible . . .”

He must have been even more shaken than he looked by what had happened, because then he told me something which normally, as a matter of sheer reflex, he’d never have revealed to anyone but another officer on the same case. “Oh, it’s horrible, all right. I – I found something at the scene. You know what it was? A stiletto, nice little thing with a perfect balance and a blade like a surgeon’s scalpel. You know what it had on the hilt? A *swastika*, all done real pretty in, I swear to God, sterling silver. A real, honest-to-Christ SS dagger. You know?

“I gave it to Lieutenant Benson back there so he could send it down to the lab for analysis. Maybe they can get fingerprints off it of the monster who did this. Jesus – isn’t life ugly enough without fucking neo-Nazi *lunatics* running around, doing shit like this?! I – oh, God, why am I telling you this? I could lose my fucking *job* if it got out!” His voice was almost shrill, cracking with strain.

“Hey, don’t worry, I won’t tell . . . Hell, I doubt I’ll remember much of *anything* about it in the morning, I’m so God-damn’ *tired* right now. . . . Man, I’ll probably have nightmares about this for at least a year!”

Briefly he reached over and patted my hand, perhaps as much for the comfort of contact with another human being as out of concern for me. “It’ll be all right . . . don’t worry, Ms. Cutter . . .”

“Linda. Just Linda. It’s fine.”

“Okay, Linda. Hey, here’s your street, isn’t it?”

I looked out the window of the car and found him just turning into my street. “Oh, hey, there’s my house.” I pointed.

He pulled the car into the curb and parked it with quick, easy grace. Turning to me with a smile, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Taking a card from it, he handed it to me. “Now, here’s my card. You call me if you hear anything more, will you? Or if there’s some trouble.”

“Oh, yes. – And thanks for the ride home.”

“That’s all right. All part of the service, ma’am!” His grin faded. “Here – let me help you out.”

He opened his door and got out. Going around to my side he opened my door and gave me a hand out, then pulled out my backpack, which I’d had on the seat beside me, and handed it to me. We watched as I went up my walkway to my door, set down my backpack, got my keys out of its outside pocket and opened my door. I turned on the light, then turned back and waved at him. Smiling, he waved back, then turned and left. I went inside. A couple of minutes later, I heard his patrol-car start up and drive away.

The day’s combination of my long, long hike, the shock I’d had earlier that evening when I’d made my discovery at the school-yard and the liquor I’d drunk at the Rotberg’s had me staggering on my feet. The only thing I wanted at that point was bed. After I had dimly made sure the front and back doors were locked and the plate was otherwise secure, I tottered to my room, peeled off my clothes and fell naked into bed without bothering to take a bath beforehand. I was asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow.

## Chapter 5: Holiday

*I wander thro' each chartered street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames doth flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

*In every cry of every Man,  
In every infan't's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear:*

*How the Chimney sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.*

*But most through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the newborn Infan't's tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.*

– William Blake (“London”)

I slept until about 2 the next afternoon. When I awoke, I was still groggy and exhausted. I had a deadline to meet in a few days on the Price-Hart article I’d been working on now sporadically for the last several weeks; if I wanted to get it to the editor of *Mother Jones* by the deadline, I’d better get downtown and back to my research over at Carnegie’s. But after all that had gone on yesterday, I had all the get-up-and-go of a wet dishtowel. There was no way I’d be able to accomplish anything worth a damn today.

My best compromise was to spend the day doing everything possible to get over the shock and exhaustion from yesterday, so that starting tomorrow I’d have all my energy and wits about me to get the job done and over with as fast as possible. So I dragged myself downstairs and raided the store of nutritional supplements I keep on hand in the refrigerator at all times. Then, some of my vitality beginning to return, I turned to making a meal for myself. I put together an enormous chef’s salad, a fresh grapefruit with honey, and a huge pot of coffee.

I agree, coffee is probably one of the worst things in the world for the body. It destroys the central nervous system, wrecks the pancreas, wrecks havoc on the gastrointestinal tract, and does things to the

brain stem that should only be discussed in a court of law, and then only after chasing out those with weak stomachs. But I've been drinking the stuff for a quarter of a century, and I'll be damned if I'll give it up this side of the Last Judgment. Frankly, I *love* the stuff:

Coffee is an awful weed;  
I love it.  
It satisfies no normal need;  
I love it.  
It makes you thin, it makes you lean,  
It takes the hair right off your bean,  
It's the lousiest stuff I've ever seen –  
Nevertheless I love it!

Trying to get the day started right without it is not something I can – or want to – do any more. Only a visit to Schick Shadel's recovery center will ever get me off the stuff – and they'll drag me in *there* over my dead body (probably after total kidney failure or a fatal heart attack). I do so love my coffee! So, on the theory that if you're going to poison yourself to death, you should do it *right*, and use only the very *best* poison, I go to my favorite connection, the Brass Teapot, this little place over on Santa Reál Street half a mile East of where I live, to get my fix. The Brass Teapot specializes in the best teas and coffees from every corner of the world. I buy whole beans from them, usually their Special of the Month, from Brazil or Jamaica or Uganda, where they do it *right*. After I get the beans home again, I put them in an air-tight container until I want to brew up some more coffee. That way, the beans are as fresh as possible, and stay that way until I'm ready to use them.

When I make the next pot of coffee, I grind just enough beans to make one cup at a time, using this little electric grinder I also got at the Brass Teapot that grinds them up the way I want them. Then, using a special filter, this plastic thing with a wire-mesh bottom thinly plated with real gold, to make sure that the filter won't add its own taste to that of the beans, I put the filter on top of the cup, a huge mug with Garfield grinning at me on the side, saying, "Go ahead, dearie – rot your guts!"; add one scoop of finely-ground Colombia or Santa Reál "Reál Thing" mix, my favorites, into the filter; pour in boiling water; and in just a minute or two, *voilà!* – the finest cup of coffee in town! . . . Especially when I add real whipping cream, ground vanilla beans, and honey.

Today, however, I made a whole pot of the stuff, using a large filter-assembly just like the smaller one, except for its size. After two cups with cream and honey, I was almost back to normal. The chef salad and the fruit completed the transformation. I certainly wasn't in shape to do the sort of research today I needed to do to finish my article for *Mother Jones*, but I could clean the house, or go bicycle riding, say, and get the cobwebs out of my mind and the remainder of the fatigue toxins out of my brain with some physical exercise. So I decided to clean house.

But after a couple of hours of it, it palled. There wasn't that much to do. A nervous Virgo with Moon in Cancer, I keep my home fairly clean all the time, as it is. About the only real chores there were to do were weeding the tiny garden I had behind my house and cleaning out the basement and straightening up the forty tons or so of stuff I've accumulated over the years and stored down there for safekeeping. The garden wasn't due for a good weed for two or three more days (though it could have used some watering, God knows, but there was water-rationing on, and I'd have to skip that for awhile); and on a nice day like what was left of this one promised to be, I wasn't about to get down there in that dark, dirty basement and risk putting my back out trying to rearrange all those crates and boxes. So it was the great outdoors for me today.

I decided to take the bike-path that ran along the cliffs going west toward Golightly Beach. It was cooler today than it had been yesterday; a cold front off the ocean threatened to bring overcast tonight or tomorrow. I put on my jeans, boots, T-shirt and a jacket, got out my old blue I0-speed from the garage and started off.

I biked northeast from Camarillo along Trudeau to Main, then down Main, across Highway 101, to Balboa Boulevard, which ran northeast-southwest along the beaches to Old Highway Road. A spur from the bike-path system ran west from the latter; the spur would take me to the bike-path that ran along the

cliffs out to Golightly Beach and UCSR. It wasn't until I was halfway out to the University from town that the events of the previous day caught up with me – and then I nearly fell off my bicycle from shock.

Why it had taken all this time, I don't know. Since waking up, I'd gone through the last couple of hours in a perfectly normal, if groggy, frame of mind, not remembering more of the previous evening than that it had happened. But now I couldn't keep the image of that little girl, with her blood-smeared face and clothing, feasting so lewdly on the corpse of the woman there in the school-yard, out of my rapidly fragmenting mind. I had to stop at once and pull my bicycle over as quickly as I could manage to avoid falling down right there in the middle of the bike-path. Leaning my bike against a raggedy fir growing there by the path, I almost fell to the ground as the last of my strength flowed out of my legs like water running off a cliff.

Shaking all over, I huddled in the shade of the fir for a while, my will paralyzed, my strength gone. Morosely I thought of Officer McKnight's admonition to me to remain where I could be reached – should I be at home? Then I remembered that I had turned on my telephone answering-device, with a message saying that I'd be back soon. If the police called, surely they'd assume my absence had no sinister import, and would leave a message for me to call them back. So I could have some time alone out here to myself with a clean conscience. But what did I want to do?

I didn't really want to go ail the way to Golightly Bench, not now. What I actually wanted to do, I realized, was go get a pizza and, after that, some chocolate eclairs and French vanilla ice-cream, and *PIG OUT!!!* *Much* more satisfying me than any ordinary lost, drunken weekend, an epic calorie-binge would cushion me quite adequately from just about anything up to and including World War III. So I struggled to my feet and, turning my bicycle around, headed back to El Camino Real – a legacy of California's Spanish heritage running from just below San Diego clear up to Monterey, near the Bay Area, along some 500 miles of California's Pacific coast and 400 years of its history. There I turned left, going northeast toward “upper” Santa Real. (Main Street, which runs northwest from the ocean for two or three miles, makes a 45° angle at that point, turning due west toward Golightly, the University, and Ano Vista, its name changing to Mercury once it crosses the city limits going west. The city of Santa Real hugs Main Street rather closely. It flanks Main on either side in two bent strips; the one on the ocean side of Main is about six or seven blocks wide, but the one on the other side extends as much as twenty blocks in some places toward the foothills and mountains of the spur of the California Coastal Ranges that bounds Santa Real and environs on the North. The part of Santa Real “above” the bend in Main, that is, along the section of Main running due east and west – which just incidentally contains some of the priciest residences in Southern California – is called “Upper Santa Real.”)

There was a Domino's Pizza Parlor just off the corner of El Camino Real and Main. I headed for it gratefully. Once inside, I ordered a medium-sized pizza with everything, with plans to save the leftovers to take home for a bed-time pig-out, along with salad, garlic bread and a pitcher of Budweiser (the alternative was Coor's, which tastes even worse than Bud, not to mention the fact that I hate Adolph Coor's labor policies, which make Simon Legree look like Jimmy Hoffa). An hour later, nicely stuffed with pizza and even more nicely squiffy on beer, and bored with the heavy-metal and rap selections playing continuously on the jukebox, which the cute little punkers and homeboyz kept eternally stuffed with quarters, I left.

Walking my bicycle along with me down the sidewalk, I went three blocks down to Baskin & Robbins. Just coincidentally, a fine bakery was next-door to the ice-cream parlor. After locking up my bicycle, I went first into the bakery, where I bought two chocolate eclairs and a double-dozen sugar-cookies, then went into Baskin & Robbins for the biggest sundae they made, plus half a gallon of French vanilla ice cream to take home with me.

The fact that I spent nearly \$40 on all this never entered my mind. Visions of Hog Heaven danced through my head, obscuring anything else – and mercifully keeping yesterday's horrors completely locked out of my mind for the duration. I enjoyed my feast thoroughly, lovingly lingering over every last crumb of the pastry and each spoonful of the ice cream. By the time I was done, the beer I'd drunk had finally worked its way to my bladder, and once I had used the restroom and got rid of it, I was no longer so wobbly on my feet, in spite of the beer. I decided to go home, put one of Mel Brooks's finer efforts on the VCR and kick it back for the evening.

The bike-path that runs out to Golightly Beach from one side of El Camino Real also extends back in the other direction at that same point, toward town. I rode back down El Camino Real toward the beaches, turning off to the left onto the bike-path to go back into the city. I had a dim memory of the path coming out

somewhere fairly near where I lived. Blithely I set off along it, taking pleasure in the alders, maples, oaks, and other trees that lined the path, their leaves stirring softly in a cool breeze off the ocean, countless birds darting through them. I laughed at a crow who was having a loud argument with another crow, maybe having it out over the bills or whose turn it was to take down the storm-shutters. The Sun wasn't all that close to setting yet, but it was very late in the afternoon, and it was getting cool. I was glad I'd brought my jacket.

It wasn't until I was within a mile or so of home that I became fully conscious of just where the bike-path ran. I had been thinking idly of nothing in particular, still somewhat stoned from my huge meal, happily trundling along over the bike-path toward town. Suddenly I realized that the territory I was in was very familiar: I was in the fields back of Fairchild Elementary School.

If it hadn't been for the noise I heard just then, coming out of the school-yard, a strange, frantic screaming like nothing I'd ever heard before on this earth, I wouldn't have gone anywhere near that school that evening for a million dollars. But the screaming, the terrified cry of some baby thing in agony, jerked me out of myself, and I could no more have kept away from there after that than I could have flapped my arms and flown.

My brain kicked out, my glands kicked in. Without thinking about it at all, I swerved with ghostly grace off the bike-path onto that same footpath by which, just yesterday, I'd come to the school-yard on the return leg of my hike. I don't know what instinctive wisdom impelled me to stop the bicycle and pull it around with that same catlike silence behind one of the bushes that grew there in the field close to the school, or tiptoe so quietly up to the oleander bushes at the school-yard corner. Certainly I wasn't at all consciously prepared for what I saw as I peered cautiously around one of the oleanders.

There was little Debby, dressed in blue jeans, a Darth Vader T-shirt and sandals, sitting on the ground in front of another oleander bush. She was gleefully holding up in the air before her the body of a long-haired, gray kitten, surveying it with a highly pleased expression. One of the kitten's forelegs was gone at the shoulder. Judging from the ruin of its shoulder, it must have been pulled off, without any finesse whatsoever; just naked brute force. The bloody little leg, ripped from the kitten's body, lay in the dirt beside Debby. The kitten looked quite dead. The scream I'd just heard had obviously come from it. There was a spike sticking out of one of its eyes.

"Now, honey, go ahead and drink the blood," urged a maternally affectionate voice. The speaker was a woman who might have been about five or six years younger than I. She had a long, long, coal-black fall of hair just like Debby's, except that it was a great deal longer than the little girl's own hair, and its color was just a little too perfectly sheeny midnight-black to be natural. She was wearing a black leather mini-skirt, black boots that came to mid-thigh, a white blouse, and rather garish gold earrings. A ring with an enormous black stone set in some silvery metal glittered on her left hand.

Aside from the hair, the little girl didn't look too much like the older woman, physically speaking, and she certainly wasn't wearing the heavy black mascara, eye-liner, and lipstick that the woman wore. Yet there was an eerie similarity between them. I finally realized that it was their expressions: the woman's pouty, pursed lips and unblinking, wide-open eyes were perfectly duplicated in the blood-spattered features of little Debby's face, which wouldn't have been out of place on a grown woman with a lot of weird mileage behind her.

The woman had a quirt at her hip, secured on her heavy black Sam Browne belt. The hilt of a stiletto peeked up from her left boot-top. Through the horror that threatened to overwhelm me I still couldn't help thinking that for all the world, she made me think of Ozma of Oz dressed to the nines for a dungeon party – or a character out of some Z-class spy-suspense movie: the Evil Nazi Female Spy.

Then, with a jolt, I realized what that red-white-and-black logo in the center of the little round, silver plate hanging in the center of each of her bizarre earrings was. Each of her earrings consisted of several slender silver hoops of various sizes suspended together at their top edges on a short braid of delicate silver wire attached to the hook going through her ear-lobe. The plate with the logo, about 1 cm across, slightly smaller than the smallest of the hoops, shared the same anchorage to the bottom of the silver braid connecting the whole assemblage to the hook as the hoops enclosing it. The logo itself, picked out in brilliant scarlet, Stygian black, and snow-white was a copy of the flag of Nazi Germany, black retrograde swastika on a white ground inside a red field.

The lady may have looked like something straight out of an *opera bouffe*, but she was involved in anything but a comedy. Standing by Debby, she was urging the little girl by a hand on the girl's arm to

bring the kitten's shattered arm to Debby's mouth. Debby, however, her eyes glowing scarlet in the same waning sunset light that so terribly highlighted the demonic, bloody mask of feral bliss into which her little-girl face had been transmuted, needed no urging. Greedily she fastened her avid mouth on the bloody mess that had been the kitten's shoulder and began to suck at it noisily.

"Good girl!" the woman told her fondly. "*Good girl!*" She patted Debby on the back maternally. Debby went on sucking away at the kitten's ruined leg, lost in rapture. The woman frowned a bit, then plucked at Debby's arm. "Teysa – hey, Teysa!"

Her concentration broken, Debby looked up at the woman, annoyed. "What do *you* want – oh, I'm sorry, what's the matter?" she said, her ire changing to contrition when apparently she recognized the woman.

"Don't you remember? Remember how good it feels? Now, if you want to make this *really* full of Power" – the capital P was unmistakable – "then we play 'Touchy' at the same time. Now, come on, don't you want to try it?"

"Sure!" crowed the child in unholy glee. Smiling, the woman stooped down, unzipped the girl's jeans, pulled them down along with her panties, and began tickling her genitals. Simultaneously, Debby reached up under the woman's mini-skirt and did the same for her.

I was nearly halfway around the oleander bush now. When I realized what the two of them were actually doing, my self-control finally broke. I think I screamed.

Both of them instantly stopped what they were doing, whipping their heads around to see what the disturbance was. Before I realized what was happening, the woman had darted her hand into a bag on the ground at her feet and had pulled out a Beretta semi-automatic, aiming it dead on my mid-section. "All right, whoever you are – come out of there *now!*" she ordered.

Eternities passed. My will seemed completely paralyzed. What I should have done at that point was to have thrown myself back behind the oleander and run for it. Instead, I just stood there like a jack-lighted rabbit, stupidly staring at the pistol aimed bang-on my diaphragm, unable to do anything, waiting for her to do whatever she would. In the near-silence that hung in the air between us, I could hear, faint in the distance, Mrs. Rotberg frantically calling: "Debby! Debby! Honey, where are you!?"

Finally I said, "*You* murdered that woman, didn't you?"

"Murder?" said the Nazi-Ozma clone, smiling lazily, like a well-fed hyena. "Oh, I wouldn't call it murder."

"What the fuck *would* you call it, then? It sure as hell wasn't a love-pat!"

"What do *you* know about it, you clod?"

"Christ Jesus, what am I *supposed* to know about it? It looked like Jack the Ripper had been at her!"

"Jack the Ripper was one of *Us*," she said smugly. Again the Capitals.

"'Us'? Who the hell is 'us'?"

"Those who have the Power. We who never forsook the Ancient Ones. Those of us who will rule the world. The New Ones, the children of the Old Ones who never forsook the True Gods." The Capitals were louder than ever.

"You know, Miss, you sound like a cross between somebody out of one of those after-the-Bomb-mutants novels and *something* from one of H.P. Lovecraft's nastier nightmares."

"Lovecraft was one of Us, too."

"I bet you invented the Wheel, too."

Her face hardened into something deadly. She raised the pistol a little higher, so that it was aimed straight at my heart. Under the circumstances, clearly it was stupid to antagonize her, but my mouth seemed to have a mind of its own: "Why, I bet you don't even know who it was you killed. – And you called Debby 'Teysa.' Where did she get *that*?"

"Oh, don't worry about the sacrifice – it wasn't anybody worth anyone's concern, just some little suburban *breeder* with too many kids, not enough brains, and a busy, busy, *busy* life with all her stupid little charities and den-mothering and her ten million other little busywork projects. You think somebody like *that* will ever produce anything of note? – After all, it's not as if she were a great composer or researcher, or a doctor or somebody else who is at least *useful!* No, all *that* kind can do is breed and breed and breed, and make the world softer and softer and weaker and weaker with all her little welcome-wagons and cub-scout meetings and *niceness*. That was that little twat's finest hour, yesterday – thanks to her sacrifice, we were

able to invoke *Asmodeus* successfully, at last . . .” She said this last with a sigh that sounded like St. Theresa describing the latest visit from her Archangel.

Stunned speechless, I just stared at her. Waiting for me to say something, the woman began to look irritated when nothing was forthcoming from me, and her grip on the gun tightened.

It was Debby herself who answered my other question. Looking up adoringly at her friend, she piped, “*She’s Big Teysa, an’ I’m Little Teysa! Right?*”

“Right, honey,” the woman answered absently. Then her eyes narrowed, and she told me, ““You know, now you’re a witness. I guess we’re going to have to kill you.”

Ten thousand things were racing through my mind. The hole in the end of that gun looked awfully big, and it was pointed straight at me. Rather inanely I said, “Well, in that case, will you at least satisfy my curiosity, and tell me who the hell you are? If you’re going to kill me, it won’t make any difference – so why not?”

Some! people like to brag. This woman was apparently one of them. “Actually, why not? My . . . birth-name, the one on my passport, was Phyllis Teysa. The Little One, here –” She reached down and patted Debby affectionately on the shoulder. “She likes my last name. She thinks it’s Magickal. And it is.

“My . . . patronymic used to be Bernstein, but that was years ago, before I left Dayton, Ohio. I changed it, you see. ‘Teysa’ is the name of a Night-Weird . . .” Seeing my bewilderment at this, she explained, “Night-Weirds are the Messengers of the Old Ones. There are male and female ones. The ignorant louts of the Middle Ages called them Incubi and Succubi.

“Night-Weirds have kings and queens, and one of their most famous queens was Teysa-Li – the ‘Li’ was a title, meaning something like, ‘The Bold.’ When I . . . when I finally Broke Through to the True Gods, the one I first invoked, Tazlan, said I really needed a name that didn’t belong to the Undermen, and would be fitting for one of the New Men. He suggested Queen Teysa-Li’s name, and I thought it felt right, so I took her name, partly for its Power, partly to honor her, for she was great of her people.

“I kept my first name, Phyllis – it’s a good, solid-sounding name that keeps me from standing out the wrong way. I took ‘Teysa’ as my last name, because if you have a normal-sounding first name, nobody really pays that much attention to your last name. – If you’re a Grown-Up, that is,” she added, scowling blackly at the specter of some ancient agony of spirit rising out of her own, unknown childhood.

“When will the God come this time, Lady?” piped up.

“Soon, honey, soon,” the woman told the girl. “He’s promised us that –“

“JesusMaryJoseph – all right, you, *hold it right there!*”

## Chapter 6: The Hungry Gorge

*Cruelty has a Human Heart,  
And Jealousy a Human Face;  
Terror the Human Form Divine,  
And Secrecy the Human Dress.*

*The Human Dress is forged Iron,  
The Human Form a fiery Forge,  
The Human Face a Furnace seal’d,  
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.*

– William Blake, “A Divine Image” (1794)



All three of us turned to see who it was. There was Tom McKnight, Glock in hand, standing in a Weaver brace at the side of one of the oleanders, aiming straight at Phyllis. She drew in a harsh breath, clamped her mouth grimly closed, kept her aim steady on me.

“I really do suggest that you drop that gun, Miss,” said another voice, coming around from the other side. It was Lieutenant Benson, from Homicide. Like Tom, he had his own gun out, leveled at the woman. I could have kissed both of them right then.

If I’d been her, the sight of two drawn guns aimed at me, held by two obviously competent and very angry cops, would have taken all the starch out of me right then and there. I’d have dropped the gun and passed out cold.

Not Phyllis Teysa. I have to give the Devil her due: she never wavered. Her finger began to tighten on the trigger – she was determined to take at least one of us out before they got her.

“Oh, my God – Debby! *Baby!* What are they doing to you?!”

“*Eh-heh-EEE-eh! Eee-YAAA!! Yeh-ho-waaw El-oh-heem! Ehl! Eh-lo-heem Gi-BOOOORRR! Ye-ho-wah El-oh-wah Vah-Dah-ah! Yeh-ho-waaw Tsahh-ba-oht! Eh-lo-heem Tsahh-ba-oht! Shah-DAEE EL-CHAEEREE! Ah-doh-naee Meh-LEHK!!!!*” This last, howled out by a strong, young pair of lungs belonging to a third party who had apparently just arrived on the scene, ended on a mind-ripping, sky-tearing eagle-scream.

Though it could have cost me my life, I couldn’t help looking around to see who it was. I needn’t have worried – behind me, I heard the *clunk!* of Phyllis’s gun falling to the ground.

Coming toward us at a dead run were Rabbi Geller, panting with effort, accompanied by a boy of maybe twenty, who had a gigantic, gorgeous Jewish Afro of curly golden hair. Both wore swimming-trunks; rubies flamed in the water that dripped from the boy’s thick, tightly-curved locks of hair as the dying sun enhaloed him with gruesome light.

Suddenly, from behind me, there came a wild gobbling. I looked back to try to locate the source, and found Phyllis and Debby writhing about on the ground beside me, caught up in ghastly convulsions. Debby moaned loudly, arching her back, rolling from side to side in a frenzy that was eerily obscene, simultaneously somehow a sexual parody of agony and an agonized travesty of sexuality. Foam sprayed from Phyllis’s mouth as she frantically whipped her head from side to side, so that it repeatedly hit the ground hard enough to have concussed anyone else, as if she were trying to kill something deadly in it by smashing it again and again against the earth; her legs and arms thrashed and contorted as if each of her limbs were independent of all the others.

Tom ran up to Phyllis and sat on her, trying to keep her from smashing herself to bits in her seizure, but had no success in controlling her frenzied writhing. Benson came to help him, and between the two of them they managed to immobilize her, more or less, and even got a stick down her throat to keep her from swallowing her tongue, though Benson almost got a nasty bite in the process. Meanwhile, Rabbi Geller ran over to Debby and began to do the same for her. She was so small and he was so large that it seemed ludicrous that even so, he had enormous difficulty keeping her still. Her small body seemed to house some titanic engine that threw her about as she gobbled, screamed, and wailed, almost in defiance of the laws of physics; it was all that Geller could do just to keep her in one place. For a miracle, she didn’t swallow her tongue; he was so busy just trying to keep her body from moving that he had no opportunity to put anything in her mouth to hold her tongue down.

The boy, white-faced and horrified, came over to me.

“Who – who are you?” I asked him shakily. Now that I was no longer in danger of being imminently murdered out of hand, I found that my legs were trembling so hard that it was all I could do stand up, and the same tremor made it hard to speak.

“I – I’m Martin. Martin Maier. Rabbi Geller’s my uncle, on my mom’s side. – You know who that woman, the one on the ground in that *messhugginner* getup, is?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“She’s – that’s Phyllis Bernstein! She teaches English out at the University. She lives right *here*, about two houses away from Debby’s, and a couple of blocks over from *us!* She’s – why those, those *schmutsik oyringlen?*!” he cried, outraged. “She goes to Beth Miqlam, where Uncle Ben’s the rabbi! We all know her! What is she *doing*, dressed up like some Nazi whore?! She’s *Jewish!*”

“Dear God – she told me her name was ‘Phyllis Teysa.’ She said she came from *Ohio!*”

“Well, she *was* both there – but she and her parents have lived *here* for the last *twenty-five years!* My mom knows *her* mom! She’s known our whole family for *years!*”

“Martin – I need your help!” cried Rabbi Geller, who was still doing his best to keep Debby from hurting herself. “Debby’s choking! I can’t get a hand free to depress her tongue, I need help!”

“Coming, Uncle Ben!” Martin ran over to help his uncle.

“Oh, God, did you find Debby? Is my baby – oh God!” It was Sarah Rotberg, who had finally caught up with the others. Utterly distraught, seeing Rabbi Geller kneeling astride her child, who was beginning to turn blue, she began to wail, a wordless, horrifying cry of total despair.

Martin was doing his best to try to get a handkerchief I’d dug out of my pocket for him into the little girl’s mouth, but was having the devil’s own time of it – Debby bit at him savagely every time he tried.

Falling to her knees beside her thrashing child, Mrs. Rotberg grabbed Debby’s jaws with the terrible strength of a woman in terror for the life of her child. Slowly, digging her fingers into the corners of Debby’s mouth and down against the muscle where the girl’s jaws came together, she forced Debby’s mouth wide open. “Put it in!” she ordered Martin. “*Now!*”

Gingerly the boy pushed the wadded-up handkerchief into the child’s mouth, yanking his hand back as soon as he succeeded to keep Debby from biting him. But the handkerchief, which was large and made of sailcloth, was now firmly wedged in Debby’s mouth, completely blocking her attempts to bite, as well as keeping her from swallowing her tongue.

However, the handkerchief also made it completely impossible for Debby to breathe. Debby passed out from lack of air, and stopped thrashing. Now that the danger of being bitten by her was over, it was an easy matter for Mrs. Rotberg to pry open her daughter’s mouth again, dig out the handkerchief, and start mouth-to-mouth respiration.

Lieutenant Benson called to Rabbi Geller, grunting with effort, “Hey, Rabbi – if you aren’t doing now, would you go call Headquarters for me? Tell ‘em what’s going on here? And call an ambulance for these two – this one’s wiggled out of her mind! How’s the little girl?” Benson was breathing hard from the effort of trying to control Phyllis’s wildly thrashing body. Sweat ran off his face in streams, and had already stained his shirt heavily, in spite of the fact that he’d left his jacket behind somewhere and the evening’s chill was coming on.

“She’s – she seems to have passed out. Yeah. I’ll go make that call – Martin, you stay here with the others, and help Sarah if she needs a hand with Debby or anything! I’ll be right back.” Staggering to his feet, he took off running down the path toward the houses east of the school.

All this time, Phyllis still thrashed and moaned, muttering incomprehensible phrases all the while, doing her best to try to bash her own brains out on the ground in spite of Benson’s and McKnight’s best efforts at controlling her. She was never to regain any semblance of coherency or sanity again – just as little Debby would remain in a catatonic trance for many years to come, long after she’d recovered completely from the effects of temporary strangulation.

It was some time before Rabbi Geller returned. When he did, it was in a police car, one of three units dispatched to the scene due to his frantic call to the station. An ambulance with three paramedics were right behind them. While he was gone, Geller had thought to put on some clothes over his trunks; he and Martin had been swimming in the Rotberg’s pool when Sarah Rotberg came running out to tell them hysterically that Debby, who had supposedly been napping in her room, still recovering from the previous day’s shock, had disappeared again, this time apparently through the open window of her room. Geller and his nephew had only stopped long enough to pull on shoes before taking off to hunt for the child, whom they had imagined to be wandering around in a fugued daze somewhere. With sunset flaming across the west in peacock glory, and night coming on quickly, it was rapidly cooling down. Accordingly, Rabbi Geller had quickly pulled on some clothes once he’d reached the house; he’d also thought to bring some back with him for Martin, who was beginning to shiver by the time the cops and the ambulance arrived.

By the time we got back to the Rotberg’s house, where Lieutenant Benson began to question us all over again, it had occurred to me that I could as easily be a suspect now as Ms. Bernstein. After all, all anyone had seen when they came busting in on us there in the school-yard was Phyllis Bernstein holding a gun on me, Debby covered with blood, and a dismembered kitten on the ground. It could as easily be assumed from all that facts at hand so far, I knew, that Ms. Bernstein had surprised me butchering that kitten and perhaps intending to do harm to Debby, and had pulled a gun on me to keep me from doing any further

harm to the child. Phyllis's admittedly weird costume wasn't evidence, however strange it may have been, and what else was there?

But right off the bat, Benson, smiling grimly, said to me in front of the others, "Well, *you're* off the hook, Ms. Cutter – as luck would have it, Tom, here –" he gestured at Tom McKnight, who sat off to the side of the room, looking queasy and grimly taking notes – "Tom and I were coming over to the school-yard with the others here, looking for Debby, when we heard voices behind those big oleander bushes there.

"You see, I had called Mrs. Rotberg earlier today, to ask her if we could talk with Debby, to find out what, if anything, she could tell us about Mrs. Grace's murder. – The name of the dead woman, you see, was Lucille Grace. She was quite well-known in the community, and very much liked. A terrible thing, her death, especially when you consider her husband and kids . . .

"—Anyway, Debby was almost certainly a witness to that murder, and anything she could tell us would have helped us immensely in trying to find the killer – which was a Number One priority, considering how terrible it was. Well, Mrs. Rotberg wasn't sure her daughter was up to it, understandably enough, after the shock the poor little kid had just been through, and she went to check on her, to find out if Debby was feeling well enough to talk with us.

"She came back in a hurry to tell us that Debby was missing and that the window of the girl's room was wide open. Mrs. Rotberg had no real idea of how long the girl had been done – it could have been anywhere up to about half an hour, which was how long it had been since Mrs. Rotberg – hell, *Sarah*. Mind if I call you that, Ma'am?" he asked her apologetically. Mrs. Rotberg, who'd been sitting huddled in a large overstuffed chair, weeping quietly all this time, shook her head dumbly without looking up or interrupting her muffled sobbing.

"Thanks, Ma'am," Benson told her. "– Anyway, up until then, as far as Sarah had known, Debby'd been in bed all day, still very ill from the shock she'd had. As ill as the kid seemed to be, it wasn't likely she'd climbed out that window herself.

"Well, under the circumstances, it seemed quite possible that she *had* been a witness to Mrs. Grace's murder and that the killer might have come over here and kidnapped her, in order to take the little girl someplace and kill her, to eliminate the one witness to that murder. So Tom and I made tracks for the school, *fast* – it was the most likely place to start looking for tracks, whatever we could find, we thought.

"Rabbi Geller and Martin were here, too. Sarah had called them this morning, before all this go started, and had asked them to come over. Not only is Rabbi Geller her rabbi, he's an old friend of the family. So he came, and brought Martin, who was over helping his uncle fix a rose-trellis or something. And it was hot, and Sarah suggested they could go swimming if they wanted to – anyway, they were here, so they came along with Tom and I, to help us look for Debby.

"So all of us had just about reached the school-yard, when Tom and I heard voices. It was you and Ms. Bernstein. We hung back to listen, make sure of what was going on, before we came on in to the school-yard and interrupted Ms. Bernstein's attempt at another murder. We'll testify in court as to what she said, which makes it glass-clear she murdered Mrs. Grace.

"And even if it weren't for that, Ms. Cutter, I'd *still* wonder what the hell that woman was doing in a God-damned *school-yard* with a .40-caliber semi-automatic pistol! – Not to mention being dressed up in that fantasy-Nazi outfit, like the belle of the Hitlerian ball or something! – She *is* Jewish, I gather?"

Martin, still outraged, spoke up. "She sure is, Lieutenant Benson! She's attended Beth Miqlam, our synagogue, for *years!*"

## Chapter 7: A Man's Worst Enemies

*A man's worst enemies are those  
Of his own house and family;  
And he who makes his law a curse  
By his own law shall surely die.*

– William Blake, from “Jerusalem”

“You know her, son?”

“You bet I do! So do my parents and Uncle Ben, here! Aunt Judith is her *mother*! Phyllis and her family, her parents and her brother, all moved here from Los Angeles *years* ago – originally they came from Ohio, but from what I hear, Phyllis was only six or so then.

“Anyway, she’s been a professor out at UCSR for quite a while, now – she teaches English Lit., a course on ‘The Novel in English Literature’ or something like that, and another one on children’s literature, things like C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books and the Oz books by L. Frank Baum and others, going all the way back to Victorian times and before.

“In fact, she’s involved with a children’s lit. society, trying to push for better books for children and promote library purchases of books such as the Oz books that lots of libraries have refused to keep in the past. I don’t know all of what’s involved with her work, but there’s a joke going around that Ms. Bernstein believes that ‘obscenity’ describes any book or anything else aimed at anybody older than about 12. In fact, Phyllis has a whole library of her own with all these old children’s books – she’s a real nut on the subject. She’s told a lot of people that she believes that only children’s books take firm stands on moral issues, that other books and films and so on doing’ seem to care about the difference between right and wrong (like she’s never seen *Schindler’s List* or *Dances with Wolves*, maybe?).”

“That’s very interesting, son. What else can you tell me about her?” Benson asked him.

“Well, sir, it’s nothing Phyllis hasn’t told people about a million times herself. She’s just so – *weird* . . .”

“How?”

“Oh, like, for example, the way she sometimes gets absolutely furious at people for no reason anybody can see. And the fact that she’s never married, hasn’t ever had a boyfriend, doesn’t date, as far as anyone knows. – Or even a *girlfriend*, either, for that matter. She makes a big production of telling everyone, over and over and over, that she feels very bad because people think she’s strange because she wants ‘to stay a virgin’ – if she never *said* anything about it, who’d *know*? Or *care*?”

“There’s a *lot* of things like that about Phyllis. She’s one of those people who have a ‘brown thumb’ when it comes to other people – things always seem to go wrong around her in a way you can never pin down, *weird* things, as if there were a curse on her or something.

“But still, I’ve never heard of her doing anything like *this!* Nothing remotely like it. Not even *saying* anything that would suggest she’d –“

“You sound like you don’t like her, Martin,” said Benson.

Martin glanced at his uncle, who nodded sadly. Turning back to Benson, Martin continued: “No, you’d have to say I don’t. She’s – she’s an absolute *killjoy*, she’s got a tongue that could cut diamond and somehow she can turn the happiest occasion into the Slough of Despond, how she does it I couldn’t tell you, but we’ve all experienced it.” Rabbi Geller grinned briefly in agreement as Martin went on: “She’s also . . . I’ve heard people like her described as ‘psychic vampires.’ You know the type that always wants to do you favors, very active in local charities, makes everybody feel as if they’d sold their souls to her if they accept her ‘charity’ and like utter ingrates or something if they *don’t* accept it? That’s our Phyllis!”

“Like, let me give you an example. A few years ago, there was a protest by the Black Student Union over something out there at UCSR. I don’t remember exactly what it was – from what Uncle Ben said at the time, though, there must have been a real grievance of some kind, something anybody with at least half a heart or brain would agree *should* have been protested. Anyway, Phyllis got up at a faculty meeting and gave a speech favoring all the demands of the students – and right afterward, the faculty voted 2-to-1 *against* the Black students’ demands. The weird thing was that they’d been just about to vote *in favor* of their demands before Phyllis gave that speech!”

“So how did you come to know about it?”

“My mom’s taught mathematics out there for years. She was *there* at that faculty meeting. She told us all about it at home, later.”

“I see. Uh, well, what else can you tell us?”

“Not much, really. Just . . . well, you’d never think that *Phyllis Bernstein*, of all the people in the world, would have been involved in anything like *this!*”

“Is she any relation to you?”

“No – her mom and my mom have been friends for a long; I know her because she’s always coming over to the house, either with her folks or on an errand for them.”

“Uh – would you be willing to testify about all this in court?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Of course?”

“It’s my duty!”

Lieutenant Benson lifted his eyebrows in a brief, sardonic smile. “I wish other people had your sense of civic duty!”

“Well –”

“Martin, don’t start with the proverbs!” his uncle laughed fondly. Turning to Benson and the rest of us, he explained, as the embarrassed boy blushed a little, “Martin, here, is a true scholar! He wanted to be a rabbi himself, so his father and I sent him to seminary – and he’s become a Qaballist!”

“Is that good?” asked Benson, smiling a little.

“Sometimes, I’m not so sure. – Seriously, he seems to have a genuine calling . . . but I think he’ll probably become a Chassid, the way he’s going! The Chassidim are the mystics of Judaism. . . . I worry about him sometimes, those can be dark waters for a young man – or an old one, for that matter.”

“Well, he seems like a fine boy. I hope my own kids turn out that well. – Son, just to satisfy my curiosity . . .” he began, turning back to Martin.

“Yes?”

“What *was* that you yelled out when you were coming up behind us at the school-yard this evening? For all the world, it looked as if it somehow made Ms. Bernstein and Debby violently ill! Certainly, *I*’ve never heard anything like it before in all my life. Why would it have had that effect on them, though?”

“Uh . . . those are, uh, names of God. Holy names.”

Benson looked at him expectantly. Less embarrassed than Benson would have thought, albeit with an edge of shaken uncertainty in his voice, Martin continued, “They . . . can be used to ward off evil, I guess that’s how you could put it. The reason I did that then – you see, I thought I saw something . . .”

“Like what?”

“I . . . I’m not sure. Just – just Phyllis’s eyes. And Debby’s.”

Sarah Rotberg, still huddled weeping in her chair, began sobbing louder at the mention of her daughter’s name, as Martin plowed grimly on, now needing badly to tell it to someone: “You know, I’ll never really be sure *what* I saw. At least, I wouldn’t want to have to testify to it under oath –” He looked at Benson, a plea in his eye.

“You can tell me,” Benson told him gently. “I won’t laugh. Believe me – I’m asking you because I think *I* saw something, myself, and I would just like to know I’m not crazy.”

“Okay, then. Well, you were carrying a flashlight, and it was turned on, because it was already coming on dark. The beam from it hit Phyllis’s eyes, then Debby’s, as you ran toward them. They had their backs to the Sunset and until the light hit them, their faces were almost in darkness, so when . . . it happened, it was pretty clear: just for a second, their eyes seemed to *glow* when the light hit them, the way a cat’s or a deer’s or a rabbit’s will at night when a light hits them, sort of a weird reddish color. Just like that.

“Telling it now, it sounds silly – but right then, when it happened, it scared me so bad I just – started calling the Names.” He looked up at Benson almost defiantly. But Benson looked respectfully impressed – and a little shaken. “I don’t disbelieve you, Martin. But could it have been just a trick of the light, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Martin agreed, looking away, staring thoughtfully at the wallpaper at the side of the room.

“Then again,” said Benson, his own eyes looking off for a moment into invisible distances, a strange note in his voice, “maybe it wasn’t just a trick of the light.” Martin looked back at him. Benson continued: “Like I said, I think I saw something very like what you’re describing, myself. It doesn’t have any official bearing on the case – but if you’re crazy, well, so am I, the same way.”

Beside Martin, the rabbi said nothing, but wrapped his arms around himself and shivered.

“Uncle Ben?” Martin asked him, concerned.

“I – nothing. I just remembered something your Great-Uncle Mordecai once told me. You know, the one who was in Auschwitz.”

“Was he the one who barely escaped that selection by Mengele?”

“Yeah. – Not important. I think the lieutenant wants to ask more questions.”

Martin looked back at Benson, who told him, “That’s okay, son. Maybe later, but right now, I have to ask Sarah some questions. – Sarah?”

The weeping woman finally raised her head and looked up at him. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and when she spoke, it was nearly inaudible, choked with grief. “Yes?”

“They’ve taken your daughter to Oceanview Hospital. She’ll get the best possible care there, none better. I would have taken you over there myself, at once, but I needed to ask a few questions first. I’m sorry, I wish we didn’t have to do this. – By the way, is your husband here?”

“No, but he’s on his way home. He was in Seattle. I called him this morning, I just couldn’t *stand* it any more. He’s been up there for several days on business, he’s an engineering consultant and he’s been doing some work for Boeing on a new space shuttle. If there was any chance Debby was going to be okay, I didn’t want him to be shaken up by all this so he couldn’t work. But she didn’t get any better – this morning, she just huddled in her bed, didn’t want to come out, she seemed so *frightened*, poor baby, and, oh, God, I just had to have Barry home, I couldn’t *take* it any more!”

“There, there, it’s all right, Sarah. Your daughter’ll be okay, don’t worry –”

“No, she *won’t* be all right!” Mrs. Rotberg’s voice, ugly with fear for her child and her hatred for a world that could do such things to any child, rose to a scream. “My baby’s been involved in a *murder*, she was covered with *blood*, my God, that poor little girl, she’ll never –”

“Please, Sarah!”

“Uh . . . I’m sorry. Oh, God, I know she’s had those hideous tantrums for years, and the way she gets those cluster-headaches and migraines, and yes, she’s been so difficult to handle –”

Though he remained respectfully silent, Benson’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully at this. Mrs. Rotberg continued: “– But *this*? What kind of a God would let a *baby* be hurt so badly? Oh, my *God* –” Suddenly she jackknifed into a huddled, sobbing ball again, hands fumbling for something.

Rabbi Geller quietly handed her his handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose with it, then thanked him in a muffled, tear-drowned voice.

“Uh, Sarah, when do you think your husband will be home?” Benson asked her gingerly.

“I – maybe around six, seven this evening.”

“Any idea what plane he’ll come in on?”

“Probably a United flight – he’ll come through San Francisco, and only United Airlines goes between the Santa Reál municipal airport and the Bay Area.

“Why don’t I arrange for him to be paged the moment he gets in? – Better, I can arrange to have him met by one of our men, who can direct him over to Oceanview. Then you could come down to Oceanview with me, to stay with your daughter until he gets into town.”

“Oh, yes, please – thank you! Yes, please, I’d like that.”

“No problem – that’s what we’re paid for. Says right here, ‘public servant’,” he told her, smiling. “I’m glad when we can live up to it.”

Suddenly Martin, outrage and bewilderment filling his voice, interjected, “Could somebody tell me something?”

“What?” his uncle asked, Benson and me a close second.

“*How* could she *do* that?” demanded the outraged Martin.

“Who? Do what?” asked his uncle, bewildered.

“How could *Phyllis* – how could *Phyllis*, of all the people in the world, get into . . . *Nazism*?” He spoke the word as if it tasted like well-ripened carrion in his mouth. “Those *swastikas*, that *outfit*, what was she trying to *do*?”

“The murder wasn’t bad enough?”

“Of course it was – but, but I got the idea she did the murder *because* of . . . being into that *dreck*!”

I nodded my head. Benson and McKnight stared at me. “Do you want to make a statement, Ms. Cutter?” Benson asked me.

“Yes, I would – but could I make it over at the station?”

“Of course. But why?”

As delicately as I could, I indicated Mrs. Rotberg with a nod; fortunately, turned inward as she was by her grief, she didn't see me. What I actually said, however, was, "I'm a writer, you see. It's easier for me to get my thoughts and memories together under some circumstances than others."

"Ah." Benson, following my gaze and instantly picking up on my intent, looked back at me and, as if nothing had happened, told me, "Yes, that'd be fine."

Rabbi Geller looked at me, his kind eyes filled with sorrow and concern. "Thank you so much for all your help, Ms. Cutter. I'm so sorry you had to get mixed up in all this – I wish we could have met under much more fortunate circumstances, you seem to be such a nice person!"

"I'm so sorry it *happened!*" I told him. And like Martin said, it's one's civic duty to help any way one can in a situation like this. Besides, it happened in *my* community, after all – I'd sure like to get to the bottom of all this and make sure it isn't likely to happen again. So if there's anything I can do to help bring that about, I'm more than happy to do it.

"But I wish so much that poor little Debby wasn't . . . involved. And that a friend of the family was the one who – uh, the perpetrator. That's *horrible* – if there were anything, anything at all I could do to change that for all of you . . ."

"Yes, well, as to Phyllis, as my nephew said, she's one of those people who seem to do very well by doing good, without pleasing very many people in the process. Perhaps that old proverb about 'good intentions' has something to do with it – we all know what road is paved with *those*, don't we?" Rabbi Geller said, smiling grimly. "At any rate, she's always been a *very* strange girl. As to Martin's question as to the why of it, Phyllis may have had a, um, a split personality. That's the impression I've gotten from what Judith, who's observed her for years out there at UCSR, has told me, together with some rumors, and the little I've seen of Phyllis herself.

"But *still* – my God, nothing like *this*, nothing so *horrible!* This is unbelievable! I'm still having trouble believing it, and I saw it with my own eyes!"

I kept my thoughts to myself. It would be time to make a full statement down at the station. Why hurt the family any more now, when it was so vulnerable, than it already had been? Let some time go by in which they could gather strength before they had to deal with even uglier things. So I merely said, "Well, anyway, if there's anything I can ever do to help, please let me know. I've been the least hurt in all this, and I don't like seeing my neighbors in such straits. You all seem like such good people – what is it, there's a book out lately, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*, something like that?"

A grin once more flickered across Rabbi Geller's face, a small flame of spirit stubbornly refusing to be blown out even by hurricane winds of horror. Then it went back to wherever burnt-out candle-flames and lost innocence go – though, I suspected, its exile was likely to be only temporary, for there seemed to be vast, hidden reserves of resilience and strength in the man, enormous underground pools of spirit waiting to be tapped by the next random wildcat jab of fate. He had found the perfect niche in life as the spiritual leader of his community – and the mystical Martin was clearly following in his practical uncle's footsteps, whether either of them knew it or not.

"Yeah," the rabbi said, "I keep thinking, it should only happen to Saddam Hussein or somebody equally deserving! – You know, though, I just remembered something, come to think of it: Judith once said something about something Liz, Phyllis's mother, mentioned to her years ago, that when Phyllis was a little girl, she was . . . abused by a next-door neighbor, a supposed close friend of the family. Liz told Judith that it only came to light when the man was arrested for participating in a child-pornography ring of some kind. They had pictures of him and other . . . perpetrators with various small children, the adults dressed up in bizarre costumes, doing utterly obscene things with one another and with the children.

"There were even some photos the authorities obtained that showed him in a . . . I think they call it a 'snuff-film,' where someone is tortured to death on camera. Horrible thing!" He shuddered, his expression queasy. Benson, suddenly alert, stared at him.

"Anyway," Geller continued, "little Phyllis, she must have been no more than about five or six, then – she may have been much younger, maybe as young as three, when it started – was apparently one of the man's victims – they found out because she was in some of the films and photos they found in the man's possession and among his, ah, cronies, along with several other children from her neighborhood, one of whom was the daughter of a policeman who lived there, can you imagine? Liz took her to a doctor as soon as they knew about it, and found that Phyllis had been . . . sexually abused, repeatedly. There was damage

to her, uh, female organs, even damage to her mouth and anus, chronic infections they hadn't realized before were there, ghastly things!

"At any rate, from what I've been learning about it over the years – I have to keep up with these things, a rabbi has to be at least as much a good psychologist as a minister, you know – apparently split personalities, what they call multiple-personality syndrome, are the result of chronic, extreme abuse and terrorization of small children, of whatever kind. In adults, they used to call this kind of thing 'shell-shock,' now they call it 'post-traumatic stress syndrome.' It's very real – and of course when it happens to a *very* young child, whose brain and soul and spirit are still developing and are still very easily and strongly influenced by everything that happens to them, let alone something as horrible and powerful as *that*, as you'd expect, very serious problems arise as a result. Some children simply go crazy, schizophrenic – not split-personalities, just psychotic. The Scots psychiatrist R. D. Laing described the difference between schizophrenia and true schizoid personalities as the difference between an asteroid belt and the Solar System – he used that metaphor trying to explain observations of one of his patients, who seemed to be both schizophrenic *and* schizoid, and as he put it, she was like a Solar system that was all asteroid belts. The mind of the schizophrenic psychotic is in large part so much spiritual and mental rubble, with little or no coherence – paranoid schizophrenia occurs when the victim finds an *idée fixe* of some kind to act as a focus, an *external* love- or hate-object to focus on, which makes him coherent in a way he couldn't otherwise be, because there is no *internal* focus.

"— Pardon me, I'm rambling. I'm becoming garrulous in my old age, aren't I?"

"Not at all, Rabbi, this is fascinating," Benson told him. "Please do continue."

"Just remember, you asked for it!" Geller told him with a grin. "Very well, at any rate, you could also say that whereas the schizophrenic psychotic's split is *external*, between himself and external reality, the schizoid person, the person with true multiple-personality syndrome, is *internally* split, his psyche divided up on some deep level into whole, discrete quasi-persons, a sort of psychospiritual community instead of a single individual. And like the members of any community, each of these quasi-persons has its own job to do. Some of them carry out the normal functions of living – going to school or work, driving the car, whatever. And some of them are there to deal with trauma, coming into existence to take on the burden of the terror, agony, and confusion that is the child's normal reaction to truly hideous, relentlessly repetitive assaults on his mind, soul, and body. There is simply *so much* fear, pain, and bewilderment – the trauma is so bad – that the young, growing mind and soul of the child can't deal with it and survive without such splitting.

"It is, you see, a survival response to a situation of appalling horror – and it does work, where perhaps nothing else would. We are very tough, survival-prone animals, we are – my Uncle Mordecai, who survived five years of the worst the Nazi regime could do to him, then came here to America and started a fabulously successful nation-wide chain of department stores, then went back to school in his *sixties* in religious studies and history, took Masters' degrees in both, then emigrated to Israel and did very well for himself there in retail, could testify to that! And I've heard stories from firemen about arriving at the scene of horrible wrecks and great fires, pulling people out of them who have been charred to the *rib-cage*, look like burned logs, they're *still breathing* for many minutes afterward, you wouldn't think they could be alive at all! Oh, we are *tough* we are, we human beings know how to survive, we have been doing it a long, long time. Jews especially can tell you – though God knows, so can the Gypsies, Black Americans, American Indians, so very many others. All the types the Hitlers of this world think of as 'germs,' 'vermin.'

"So what happens when you go after any 'germs,' 'vermin' with poison and antibiotics? You know what happens? You end up with mosquitoes like B-52s, giant Alaskan types, like we got all bitten up by up there on my last vacation!" he laughed. "And rats as big and tough as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, and bacteria that just *laugh* at anything you can throw at them! – No, it's not a good idea to set pogroms on human beings. *Any* human beings. All you get is the world's toughest, meanest, smartest, most survival-prone beings you could imagine – or can't imagine. Moishe Dayan!" he said, grinning.

"And this is even more true of human children. And when they are put through something like poor little Phyllis was put through – well, anything can happen. If they live and manage to function afterward at all – and so very often they do, more often than not, we are learning, as Freud learned from his patients (but swept under the rug later, damn him) – then frequently it is because they split in this way, developed multiple-personality syndrome. Mutliples, I understand, are often far brighter and more talented than the average person – maybe it's because they have whole teams to work on things, instead of just one person!



“That’s the bright side. The bad side – well, who knows what character-traits each personality in a multiple develops? Often one or more of the alters – the alternate personalities – become suicidal. Frequently they are filled with tremendous anger, which is understandable. And in a very few cases I’ve heard of – maybe this is the phenomenon that gave rise to the idea of possession – alters can be utterly demonic, all the way over the edge into a psychology which, while intelligent enough in an intellectual sense, is totally divorced from what you might call *moral* reality.

“Normally – in the overwhelming majority of cases – though, this doesn’t happen. But frequently the alters can be dangerous to the person or to other around him, because they become suicidal, or filled with rage they then try to act out, or because they are very stupid and heedless of consequences and put the person or those around him in danger when they ‘come out’ because of the idiot shenanigans they pull. They aren’t malefic, that is, not evil – but they can still create real problems.

“And once in a while you get a situation in which the person is, like some of those Laing treated, both schizoid and borderline psychotic, who keeps from going all the way over the edge into true psychosis by developing paranoid schizophrenia, instead. That is, one or more of the personalities manage to remain coherent by developing an *idee fixe* – an external focus of some kind, religious, or a persecution mania, or inappropriate limerance (falling in love), whatever – to act as a psychic and spiritual focus, because the ability to develop and maintain an internal one has been completely shattered by repeated, hideous trauma of some kind. Such people can be quite dangerous, because, as is true in paranoid schizophrenia in general, their choice of external focus, though it has symbolic, psychological significance for them and is appropriate in terms of their psychospiritual needs, is *not* appropriate in terms of the exigencies of objective reality. Like believing that Mickey Mouse is behind all the evil in the world, and that he sends Donald Duck and his nephews to follow you around and persecute you, and has gotten all your neighbors in league with him and – you get the idea?”

“Unh-hunh!” laughed Benson

“We have to take some of those over to the psycho ward at Santa Reál General all the time!” added McKnight, joining in the laughter.

“Anyway,” said Geller, “maybe this is what happened to poor little Phyllis.”

“Uncle Ben, with all respect, I don’t think so,” Martin suddenly spoke up, looking as if he’d finally worked out a puzzle that he’d been mulling over awhile, and didn’t like the answer.

“Oh? So tell me, what do you think it was?”

“Uncle Ben, do you remember Mandy Jefferson?”

“The girl in your ninth-grade class over there at John Adams Junior High, the one who became a Satanist?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Her parents were Christians, and she was raised as a Christian. But once she got into junior high, around 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she got into drugs, and started doing them pretty heavily. Her parents never knew a thing about it until it was *way* too late, when she got busted in her junior year of high school. It wasn’t even their fault, either – like, I knew the crowd she go in with, and I knew *her*, and she was *real* good at keeping secrets!

“Well, in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she decided she wanted some *real* kicks – and that’s when she got into Satanism. She read a bunch of books, borrowed a bunch of literature from an older friend of hers who’d joined something called ‘the Temple of Loki,’ too, worked very hard to find other people into the same thing – and she managed to keep it all completely under wraps until she finally got busted for that animal-mutilation thing.”

“So what does this have to do with Phyllis?”

“Uncle Ben, if a girl from a good *Christian* family – and they *were* good, good Christians and good people, remember? Well, if *she* became a Satanist, then what would a girl from a good *Jewish* family get into if she were out for kicks?”

“I – oh. Oh, no, Martin, no, not *that!* That’s *ridiculous!* On top of everything else, as you yourself just pointed out, Phyllis is absolutely the *last* person in all this world who would go in for such a thing! I mean, not only is she a contributing member of B’nai B’rith, but –“

But Benson was grinning and nodding approvingly, and McKnight was likewise grimly nodding. “Well, it may be ridiculous, as you say, Rabbi,” Benson told Geller, “but we had a case like that here just last year, and there’ve been a number of them around the country during the last decade or so. Jewish kids getting into Nazi-type mini-‘cults’ and so forth. Of course, there are far fewer of them than there are

Christian kids getting involved with Satanism or whatever – but then, there are a lot fewer Jews than Christians in this country, too, and there seems to be about the same *proportion* of Jewish kids involved with Nazism to Christian kids with what you might call sorcery, criminal occult doings in general, not just Satanism, as there is of Jews to Christians in general. In other words, something's in the wind, and it isn't sparing any particular ethnic group. There have even been similar cases involving Islamic families, Buddhist families, you name it, all over the map, about the same proportion in each ethnic group as the ratio of the members of that group to the general U.S. population, and it's been growing steadily over the last ten, fifteen years or so.

“Of course, it's gone up a lot since that sunuva – uh, that jerk Gerald Rivera did that TV special on Satanism, damn him to hell, anyway! But all too many kids out there, from every background under the Sun, are just psychological accidents looking for a place to happen in, as it is, and if it hadn't been that, it would have been something else, sure as God made big green road-apples!

“At any rate, I don't find it so strange that no one knew until now that Ms. Bernstein was involved in this sort of thing. An awful lot of people hide some very nasty secrets indeed behind the world's nicest façades – man could I ever tell you some stories about people right here in the naked micro-city! – Well, anyway, you see stories about things like this on the news all the time – the influential businessman, pillar of the community, who beats his wife until one day he kills her. The richest man in the county, right up there with people like Bill Gates and Ross Perot, heir of one of the great railroad barons, they caught *him* all dressed up in scuba gear, wet-suit, mask, and all, under a roadside privy out in Slopoc, he wanted to “look at lady's bottoms” and couldn't think of a better way to do it, and ended up *live!* on the 10 o'clock news that same evening after the Highway Patrol and a road-crew who were called out there by some poor woman he'd scared half to death pulled him out of there and booked him downtown. The nice couple who roast their baby to death in a frying pan one night, he's a minister of the local church, she organizes all the church suppers and other affairs. The two honors students attending UCSR, majoring in psychology, live in a rented house in a nice part of Santa Reál for a couple of years before somebody discovers they've got this little nine year old girl chained in the basement of the house, had her there for two years, they'd kidnapped her from her home just ten miles down the road, in Golightly, been using her as their private sex-toy ever since.

“And so it goes, as the man said, on and on and on and *on*, until you want to tear your eyes out and puncture your eardrums so you don't have to run into this ever, ever again! What Ms. Bernstein got involved in was just a little weirder than you usually hear about – but as bad as it turned out, there've been much worse things happen here, sorry to say!” He looked sad and disgusted, afflicted with memory.

Rabbi Geller looked shocked, but Martin just nodded safely. Like most people his age, he was far, far more aware of current events and trends, particularly those involving young people, than most of his elders, even the Rabbi.

“You know,” Benson mused, more to himself than any of us, “I wonder if this case ties in with any of those animal-mutilation cases we've had in this area lately, or the murders of that tramp and those two little kids we had awhile back. Or the child-molestation reports we had a couple of months ago. I will be anything

—  
“Oh, well, never mind. I think,” he continued, speaking to us all directly, “what we want to do is take statements from all of you. But I'll wait for Sarah's until we get to the hospital – she's pretty much told me most of what there is to tell, as it is.

“In fact, Ms. Cutter is about the only one of you who hasn't given a detailed statement concerning what she saw and experienced this evening. But like she said, we should take that down at the station.

“Tom?” He turned to McKnight.

“Yes, sir?”

“Could run Ms. Cuter, here, down to the station? She wants to give a statement, but feels it would be easier to give it properly there.”

“Linda? Sure. When?”

“Now, I guess – if it's okay with you, Ms. Cutter?”

“Certainly, no problem.”

“Good. So I can take down any additional information that Rabbi Geller and Martin have for us right here, and bring it over to the station later.”

“All right, sir,” said McKnight. “—Linda? You ready?”

“Sure. I – oh, *damn*, my *bicycle!*”

“What?”

“She’s still back there at the school-yard!”

“No, it isn’t – it’s right out front of the house, here. Patterson brought it back for you.”

I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I love that old bicycle – the two of us go ‘way back. I’ve put more miles on that thing than Cook has tours. Sometimes I think that when I die and approach the Pearly Gates, dear ol’ Blue Thunder’ll be the first one there to greet me. The thought of somebody swiping her from the school-yard had thrown me for a minute. Mentally I made a firm notation to give as big a contribution as possible to the next Policeman’s Benefit Fund drive in my area by way of gratitude for the rescue of Blue Thunder – and for the fact that now I didn’t have to go anywhere near that playground to get her, myself. “Hey, Tom – can we heave her into the back of your patrol-car and drop her off at my place on the way?”

“You bet! No problem at all, I go right by there on the way to the station.”

“All right.” Standing up, I hitched at my coat to straighten it, hauled my backpack back up onto my shoulders, and started for the door, which Tom was already holding open for me.

As we started off to the station, Tom told me, “I kinda have this idea there are some things you didn’t really want to say in front of Mrs. Rotberg.”

“Spot on, Thomas.” I began telling him what I’d seen the first time I saw Debby, as well as on the second occasion, when I’d surprised her in the school-yard, as she was battenning on Mrs. Grace’s still-warm, bleeding body, before I’d run screaming for help. By this time McKnight was already parked in front of the station, listening in appalled, fascinated silence. I finished up, as briefly as I could, with a description of what I’d seen that third and last time, when I’d discovered Phyllis and Debby together there in the school-yard, before the police and everyone else had arrived in the nick of time, the cavalry to the rescue.

Tom said something I couldn’t make out.

“Hmm?”

“That kind of fits with what the crime lab came up with,” he told me, looking queasy. “Normally, you see, Forensics is backed up for weeks with stuff to be tested, but the head of the lab just happens to be a neighbor of the Grace’s, the dead woman’s family, and he was so upset when the evidence came in and he found out who had been murdered that he took charge of it right there and ran most of the tests himself that night.

“Maybe you don’t remember, but I got a swatch of stuff off Debby’s mouth the first time I saw her, when you discovered her with Mrs. Grace’s body. The preliminary reports on the analysis of that stuff came in this morning; we should have the rest in a day or two. What we’ve got so far looks *real* strange – but it does tally with what you’ve said.”

“Jesus – and here I was hoping I’d been hallucinating it or something!”

“You don’t know the half of it!”

“Tom you look as if you’ll go crazy if you don’t tell *someone* – come on, Thomas, *tell* me. Mum’s the word on this end, I promise.”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the Rabbi. But – but – oh, shit, it wasn’t just the blood from Mrs. Grace’s *neck* on Debby’s mouth, you see. Mrs. Grace was . . . was on her . . . she’d fallen off the . . . er, she was menstruating when she was killed . . .” His hands began to tremble heavily; the steering wheel, which he was gripping like a drowning man clinging to a floating board, shook in its mount. Of course I’d heard the expression “his face went green” countless times before, but I’d never seen a case of it in real life until now. “We just heard from the crime lab,” he finally managed to continue, gagging a little. “They finally finished their analysis of that swab we got off Debby the other day. They determined that Mrs. Grace’s *pubic hairs* were . . . on Debby’s mouth.”

## 2. Evendark

Come to me at evendark,  
Wrapped in flame and night;  
Cover me in your cloak of fire  
And set my soul alight  
With blazing rage of culmination,  
In revenge and hope and sorrow,  
Then stand with me, by my side,  
In the dawn of an alien tomorrow.

Life is cradled in a chalice  
Of bone and blood and dream;  
Death is Hades' draining pull  
At its fiery wine.  
Come to me in Samhein dusk  
With thy Staff incarnadine;  
Then ride with me in midnight joy  
Down Tartaros' sorrowing stream  
That dreams in ash and myrrh and musk  
Through hells of Neptune and Mars,  
Across the blazing desert of Time  
And out to an Ocean of Stars.

Drift with me on the Sea of Night  
To the crêpe-hung halls of Persephone;  
On a bed of skulls and a cushion of wraiths,  
Two screams embracing in Fire and Death,  
Silver crushed by iron and gold,  
Lace dragged through wet clay,  
Moonlight shattered by trumpets and bombs,  
Perfume over a ghoul's breath.

### 3. The Execution

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

– John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887*

“–the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Amen.” Quietly the priest closed his Bible. Looking up, he saw that the hands of the old-fashioned institutional clock that hung high on the cinder-block southern wall of the room stood at 25 minutes of 13 o’clock. From the grilled window beside it, nearly as high on the wall, putrescent, curdled early-afternoon light poured into the room, almost bile-colored from the pollutants that made the air over the San Francisco Bay megalopolis a deadly, toxic, mutagenic stew. He looked back at the young girl who trembled like a terrified rabbit in the restraints binding her tightly to the high-backed metal chair, cutting cruelly into her wrists and ankles. Pity clouded his eyes; he turned away, stifling a sob, and looked instead at the Governor, all too aware of the AK-47s carried by the guards in the corridor. He could do nothing whatsoever to help the girl. anything he tried would be utterly wasted effort, simple suicide without even the saving grace of the sacrifice of self for the good of another. “Governor Montrose, please, please – in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the pity of his Holy Mother, can’t you –?”

One look was enough. The Governor, a man old long before his time, too weak to bear the burdens thrust upon his all-too-mortal shoulders these last few years by so many sudden and unbelievably radical changes of fortune, somehow cowered down into his own shoulders, as if he were trying to become a turtle and hide from it all in his own shell. He wasn’t about to do anything to stop this ugly lampoon of justice. In implicit agreement with Father Perry’s assessment of him, as if to exonerate himself from any responsibility for what was about to happen, Montrose said pleadingly, unable to bring himself to look the young priest in the eyes, “It’s the law, can’t you see? She’s guilty as hell – under the law. At this point, only her father can –”

“And her father damned sure as hell *won’t!*” boomed the big man who stood next to Montrose. His height and bulk, still in very nearly the shape he’d been when he’d played linebacker for Notre Dame over three decades ago, so overshadowed the smaller Montrose that the Governor seemed almost ghostly by comparison with him. The comparison was especially apt, given the bigger man’s high color, versus the grayish tinge to Montrose’s waxy-pale features. “That little tart knows what she did. As you say, it is the law, isn’t it?” the bigger man said, his accompanying bright, alkali laughter peeling yet another layer from the suppurating skin of Montrose’s soul. “‘A woman caught in adultery shall pay for her crime with her life.’ Quote, unquote. You helped to sign that bill into law three years ago, Marvin, when you were a Senator. What’s the matter, you little pansy, wimping out on me now? Like your faggot brother, the WomLibber? Or your other brother, that crack-brained antique who wanted to reinstate the Bill of Rights? Hanh?” He looked down at Montrose, almost gloating. Montrose visibly flinched, as if catching sight of a tornado bearing down on him.

“No, no, Colin, oh, no, you know I wouldn’t,” Montrose told the other man in an ashen whisper, unable to look at him, either. Instead, he stared down at the dingy concrete floor, his gaze not fully focused, as if he were somehow looking through the floor and the bulk of the Earth beneath it out into the interstellar abysses beyond.

“Well, let’s get on with it, then,” said the big man, knocking the ash of his cigar onto the floor before drawing on its fragrant smoke.

“B- but adding one murder to another like this is –” the young priest began, attempting one last, desperate plea.

“I hear one more word of you, Jesus-jumper, you’ll join the little bitch there, hear? That ought to please your God – I hear he just loves burnt offerings!” the big man growled at the priest.

His face chalky, Father Perry turned away, toward the wall and the source of the rotten poisonous daylight that competed so poorly with the harsh white light pouring down from the room’s fluorescent overheads, and began to pray in a nearly inaudible voice.

“Now *haul ass*, Marvin!” the big man bellowed, turning back to Montrose. “Have them bring it in!”

“Yes, Colin, I will, I will. Yes. Only take a moment, please,” mumbled Montrose in a sad, weary voice, surrendering. “Dear Christ – I can’t take much more of this – for the love of God, let’s get it over with,” he muttered as he stepped to the door. Standing by the door, he paused, to pull himself together a little. Then, taking a deep breath, steeling himself, he said to the guards who waited there, “All right, bring him in now.”

“‘It,’ Marvin – how many times do I have to tell you, ‘it’! Under the law, it’s not *anything*, no more’n a side of beef!”

“But – but it’s your own –” the appalled Governor of California began, spluttering, staring at the other man in growing horror.

“None o’ *mine*, it ain’t – it’s that little bitch’s, over there! She had it, *she* can claim it. *I* sure the fuck don’t want it!”

“But –” Whatever Montrose saw in the other man’s face as he stared up at him, aghast, finally made him give up completely. Sighing, he turned to the barely nubile 14 year old girl who occupied the metal chair. His heart turned over as he regarded her drawn face, her delicate raven eyebrows that looked as if they had been brushed onto her nearly translucent flesh with a few deft strokes by Boticelli himself, her midnight lashes trembling minutely as she struggled hard, not quite successfully, to stifle her own terror and grief, her small breasts now swollen with milk. “Dear – uh, Miss Delacroix, do you understand the nature of the charges against you? The sentence?” he asked her gently. “Do you know why we’re doing this?”

Her great, ocean-gray eyes huge and glassy with terror and confusion, the girl was so paralyzed with fear that she could only wag her head from side to side, like some toy with its head on a spring: *No. No. No.*

Montrose looked back at Delacroix. “My dear God, man – the child doesn’t even know why this is happening! Look at her! Can’t you –”

“Oh, fuck you, you asshole! The hell with all this horseshit. Let’s get the fuck on with it, God damn it to hell anyway!” Delacroix demanded petulantly, stabbing at Montrose with the red coal at the tip of his enormous cigar for emphasis.

As if on cue, the guards brought in the tiny, naked, squalling bundle that was Janice Delacroix’s two-week old son. His screams shattered the mordant air. He had had no milk, nor even water, for hours now, and he must have been in frightful pain from the cramping of his empty gut. He howled for food, for comfort, for love, for warmth – which never came, silence, cold, and pain his only answers.

“Oh, dear Jesus, Holy Mother Mary, my baby, my baby!” Janice found her voice at last, in her desperate terror for her helpless infant son. “What are you going to do to him?” Her eyes, very nearly the only part of her that could still move, so tightly was she bound to the chair by the heavy metal restraints, darted wildly about the room below the metal cap that covered her shaved head. Nowhere did she see any hope, any refuge, and comfort either for herself or for her baby.

“The law of the land says, Janice, that ‘the fruits of adultery must be cast away with the tree that bore them,’” Montrose told her, his gentle, concerned voice contrasting weirdly with the words he spoke. “By conceiving and bearing this child, your son, you ensured his death, as the direct consequence of that crime, as surely as you did your own. You have thereby committed murder as well as adultery, and must pay the penalty for these crimes, which is death.”

“But – but –” The girl became frantic in her terror, her dawning, horrified comprehension of the reality of her situation coming far too late to do her any good. She struggled wildly against her bonds, without success, as her tiny son wailed in counterpoint to her thrashing efforts to free herself, to come to his aid.

For the first time, Kathleen Delacroix, Colin Delacroix’s wife and Janice’s mother, spoke up from beside her husband, by whose side she had been standing all this time. Her hair was the color of blued steel; her face might have been molded out of the high-impact plastics now used in munitions. Her words dripped from her carefully lipsticked, scarlet lips like envenomed honey in an understated purr that was far more terrifying than even her husband’s florid-faced bellowing. “Janice,” she told her daughter, “you know exactly what you did. You have to die. Your bastard must die,” she sneered genteelly. Her mouth curved

briefly in a razor-edged smile, her red, red lips blood on its cutting edge. The pleasure in that smile was just a little too much for the already shaky nerves of Montrose, Father Perry, even some of the guards, who flinched visibly. Absently she brushed her black-gloved hands down the sides of her dress, a simple, tasteful little import from Czechoslovakia that had made the shop where she had purchased it several hundred Newdollars richer. The same Stygian black as her long gloves, it set off the great, flawless yellow diamonds on the choker about her neck and set in her pendant earrings rather well, hugging her trim figure like a lover's imagination. She looked over at Montrose, who cringed by her husband's opposite shoulder, her lips still slightly pursed in that disturbingly bloody smile. "Yes, Marvin, do get this nonsense over with. I'm surprised you've let this farce drag on as long as you have," she chided him in her elegant, finishing-school diction.

"Oh, dear God, Kathleen –"

"Do it, asshole!" Delacroix snarled, balling his hands into fists nearly the size of Montrose's skull. Bits and pieces of his forgotten cigar, crushed to powder in his huge right fist, dribbled to the floor from between his tightly-clenched fingers. "You do what my wife tells you to do, or I'll have you in that chair, along with the Jesus-boy over there!"

Montrose, shuddering, turned away, toward the guard who held out the scalpel-edged sabre to him. The enormous ruby inset into its hilt, which was plated with silver, flashed balefully under the fluorescents. *Manus Dei sola*, he motto incised on the hilt of the sword reminded him. It felt like sacrilege to take it up – but there was Delacroix, breathing down his neck to make sure of his obedience. So, taking it gingerly by one hand, he nodded wordlessly at the guards.

One of the other guards now took the wildly screaming, beet-faced baby from the one who had held him all this time. Holding the boy high in the air by his tiny fists, so that his feet kicked futilely in the air, this guard now turned, presenting the baby's naked abdomen to Montrose. Once more taking a deep breath and somehow seizing control of his nerves again, Montrose took one quick swing with the sabre, managing by luck or fate to connect with his target at precisely the right angle. The baby's screams suddenly choked off, his eyes going wide in shock and acid pain as the sabre bit deep into his bowels. His slashed intestines welled out of the huge gash in his abdomen, their contents spilling noisomely onto the floor. Just incidentally, in its deadly passage through the child's body, the sabre happened to sever his aorta as well. The boy therefore died almost instantly, his life fountaining out in bright, gouting jets of scarlet arterial blood.

"Why, you –" the fuming Delacroix began, advancing on Montrose like a mobile volcano on the verge of eruption.

"It was an accident. – Sir." One of the guards had suddenly spoken up. He was a very young man, his features not yet congealed into the granite they would later become. His eyes were full of pity, loathing, nausea, and, possibly, the beginnings of rebellion, which was not quite hidden behind the veil of indifference which most of his older colleagues had assumed for the sake of survival. "Really, sir, I saw – the Governor couldn't help it. The ... it kicked, twisted at just the wrong moment, so the Governor's stroke couldn't hit true. Otherwise it'd have gone fine. Sir." His eyes met Delacroix's almost insolently, refusing to look away, as if daring the older man to argue with him.

Delacroix may have been in stunningly good shape for a man his age, but the young Marine officer before him was half his age, two inches taller than he was, about the same weight, and in top condition, at the peak of his training. He also carried an AK-47, which Delacroix suddenly saw had been slightly raised in the younger man's white-knuckled hands, its muzzle dangerously close to being in line with the older man's body. It was only then it came to Delacroix that Montrose was himself a retired colonel of the United States Marines – and that these young men here were very well aware of it.

His face purpling, he started to turn to the Marine's superior, who bore the rank of captain, to demand that he discipline his subordinate – and saw that now all the guards were staring at him with that same steel-hard gaze, their hands twitching on their assault rifles. For several moments, Caesar and Caesar's praetorian guard locked gazes. It was Delacroix who finally looked away, feigning indifference himself.

"Oh, fuck!" he snarled. "Doesn't anything I want ever get done right? – All right. The hell with it. Let's wind this up and pull the switch on the bitch.

"– Hey, I like that!" Delacroix chuckled, suddenly brightening. "Pull the switch on the bitch?! I'm gettin' better all the time – now I'm a poet an' don't know it!" He looked over at his wife. She smiled fondly and took his arm.

“Mommy! Daddy!” Janice suddenly cried, her voice wild. “Daddy – that was your own son!” Her eyes, now the color of evening fog, swung in horror from her father to her mother. “Mommy – I couldn’t help it! He made me! You know – you were there! You helped him! Mommy – that was his baby! Your grandson!” Her voice scaled up into impossible registers as her horror mounted.

“Yes, I know,” Kathleen Delacroix said crisply, her eternal poise the eye of whatever hurricane in which her husband happened to be currently involved, whether political, financial, or part of their own private affairs. In her rich, purring voice, however, was an almost gleeful note.

“What? Mommy – don’t you care?” the stunned girl asked her.

“Of course not! Why should I? After all, darling,” Mrs. Delacroix told her daughter, laughing a little, “you were always much more trouble than you were worth! This seemed to be the simplest way to take care of that little problem – at least you gave your father some joy! – Not to mention how handily this fit into our plans ... I really do think Thantifaxath and Shaliçu will be quite pleased with your father, now,” she added musingly, raising her eyes to the ceiling as she made some inward calculation. “Yes, I think he really needn’t worry about his re-election now ...”

Meanwhile, impatient to have it done and over with, before anyone else quite realized what he was about to do, Colin Delacroix, forty-eighth President of the United States of America, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces, and second President under the New U. S. Constitution, reached out himself and thrust down the master-switch that connected the chair and its occupant directly to San Jose’s main electric power station.

The harsh, bright overheads suddenly yellowed and dimmed as 12,000 volts of electricity surged through the chair and the instantly galvanized body of Janice Delacroix. A ghastly marriage of the mingled stenches of scorched hair, boiling urine and milk, cooking feces, and burning pork quickly filled the appalled air.

Lightning slammed into Janice’s shrieking brain. Soul. Spirit. She felt herself falling. Looked down. Saw hungry, clawing flames, and Jesus beside them, His oddly sensuous face filled with lickerish glee, gloating over the screaming children He was tossing into those flames with a huge, incandescent iron pitchfork, her own murdered infant son among them. His goaty eyes, glowing like molten copper, stared into hers with anticipatory hunger. “But why do you hate me so? I love you!” was her last fading, bewildered, agonized thought.

The clock on the wall now read 13:00, straight up.

The lights had returned to their former Antarctic-Summer brightness.

The young priest still stood by, his eyes closed, hands templed before him, deep in prayer. Montrose, now huddled over in a corner, retched loudly.

The Marines Corps guard stood to attention, their unrelenting, unforgetting laser eyes still locked on Delacroix.

Emitting a drawn-out, hissing sigh like a dragon in the throes of orgasm, Delacroix looked on at his daughter’s convulsing body, avidly watching as the fluid in her eyeballs poached, the fluid in them boiling behind their irises, and blood spouted from her ears and nostrils. Enormous satisfaction welled up in him. “Hope your crew got all that on film” he remarked to the still-retching Montrose with a genial chuckle, his pleasure temporarily mellowing his famous temper into something approaching magnanimous beneficence. “Just in time for the 1800 News, if you rush the processing. Great thing to show at my next inauguration celebration,” he added thoughtfully, absently drawing a new cigar out of his pocket.

For a moment, the light dimmed once more, becoming a sulfurous yellow-red, and the temperature of the room dropped to a bone-chilling cold. The Marines shivered spasmodically, looking miserable. Suddenly a bright-red coal appeared at the tip of Delacroix’s cigar, though he had touched neither match nor lighter to it. Taking an appreciative draw on the cigar, apparently completely oblivious to the icy-cold of the room, Delacroix mused, “Wonder what we’ll do for the election after this one? Honey,” he said, turning to his wife, who beamed up at him approvingly, “do you suppose your niece – you know, your younger brother’s second kid, the fat little tart with that stupid idea about going to Stanford to study quantum engineering, or some fucking thing like that – will be ripe for breeding by then?”



## 4. 1918: Belleau Woods

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Every night, behind my sickly, tireless eyes I see again  
Some poor devil crawling over slimy, blood-soaked dirt,  
Drooling out his lungs from his nose and shattered mouth  
In gurgling whimpers of stringy yellow snot –  
Take your bellowing, smugly pious, patriotic preachers home, Jack;  
They aren't welcome here.  
Sherman was right: war is Hell;  
It's cruel enough to drag us off to slaughter  
And be slaughtered for you aristocratic monsters.  
Don't expect us, as well, to believe your fucking lies  
About Honor, Duty, Country, Faith and Glory.  
I've seen too many faces reconstructed  
In green and waxy, reeking, maggoty pus –  
Too much of entrails dragging ink-blue on the ground,  
Tripping up their crawling owners –  
And black-marketeers growing fat and smiling  
Over the mewling agony that once was living men –  
Laughing, laughing at our folly  
Of obeying princes who never gave a damn  
About the evil cost in lives and pain and flesh  
Of the wars that clothe them in their silks and lace  
And fill their fucking coffers with fucking bloody gold.

## 5. And Then They Took the Women Away –

She had never liked traveling by railroad, anyway; this journey was a nightmare, and to compound her misery, it went via the slowest, most run-down of rail “services” imaginable. As one of her traveling companions – however accidental that companionship may have been – had joked earlier, “It’s a proper road to Hell, it is – but where are all the good intentions it was supposed to be paved with? I can’t believe it ever had any good intentions!”

*Ha. And ha. Very funny, Kate. Wish I had your sense of humor . . . can’t see anything funny in it at all, myself, though.*

Huddled into a corner of the car, too depressed even to weep, she stared dully off into nowhere, oblivious to the close-packed female bodies all around her. Underlying the matrix of the ripe scents of female sweat and urine and pheromones, of stale, moldy, and rotten food and foul water, of menstrual blood and feces and vomitus and worse in which she was embedded, knitting it all together with skeins of implication into a dark, ominous olfactory shroud covering all, was a cloyingly warm, sweet stench that reminded her just a little too much of pork gone bad whenever she temporarily surfaced from the eternal, searing gray calm of depression. Whenever she did manage to come far enough out of that hot, dark fog of despair to become more than minimally aware of her surroundings, she fled again as quickly as possible back into its stuporous comfort before full recognition of her circumstances could drive her completely over the edge, once and for all.

Memories drifted through her mind. Dazed, she reviewed them all without reacting, without feeling . . .

– “Hey, cunt – wanna fuck?” the leering young tough snarled at her as she came out of the store. She’d never seen him before in her life . . .

– “So then,” her father was saying, “when this nance tried to get past us, me ‘n’ Fred grabbed the God-damned queer-boy and beat the holy livin’ shit outta him! Can you imagine? The little cocksucker tried to fight us back, would you believe – an’ the fuckin’ faggot cops tried to arrest us for, hah!, get this, ‘assault with intent!’” Chuckling nastily, he continued, “Taught him – pah-don me, her a thing ‘r two!” . . .

– “Bitch!” her mother’s whiskey voice leered, swollen with lickerish rage. “You filthy little whore! I’ll teach you to play the hussy like that – who told you could wear lipstick? An’ you wanna go to a dance, hunh, you little bitch? Sure you do! I know your kind – you jus’ wanna spread it for alla them dirty filthy boys! Knew you were a whore from the beginning – you was always casting flirty eyes on the men even when you was a baby, damn you! My own daughter, God damn you! Then you hadda go start havin’ periods when you was only eleven – proves yer a whore! No self-respectin’ girl starts getting the Curse until at least 15 – I sure as Hell didn’t! Lissen, you bitch, I ‘ll teach you –” She’d grabbed that poker with no warning, and had thereupon given Anna the scar on her cheek, below her left eye, which she carried to this day, ten years later. Absently, Anna reached up and touched it. It had never healed completely, and it ached in cold weather, as it ached now . . .

– “Nigger!” her brother screamed at another boy, his own age, who’d wandered into the wrong part of town. “Nigger, I’m comin’ to get you –” Picking up a rock, her pasty-skinned brother, who looked like a troll made out of white bread, advanced on the terrified youth, a dark-skinned Adonis. The Black boy fled, pursued by her brother, who was joined by other white boys who came along for the sheer joy of it. Later, she heard how the Black boy had died at the hands of “unidentified assailants” who’d caught him somewhere in a deserted area, poured gasoline over him, and set him afire . . .

– “Dirty brat!” the man bellowed. He was clearly drunk; the alcohol only added fuel to whatever fire raged beneath the black cauldron that fulminated somewhere deep in his brain. Crazy rage permeated with a terrifying midnight glee filled his voice. Shortly the screams began, thin and high, born of inconceivable agony and horror. They belonged to what must have been an extremely young child. After a while, the screams and the bestial bellows of the man’s delighted rage had competition – sirens, high and tinny and far away, coming ever closer. Finally the sirens drowned out the other sounds completely. Then there were shouts, and crashing and splintering of wood, followed by gunshots, and then a long silence. An ambulance came, finally, and took away a small, limp shape in an appallingly tiny body-bag. It was followed by a second, which streaked away from the scene carrying two officers, one

still alive, his chest leaking blood from a ghastly shotgun wound, the other, his face shattered and skull opened above his left eye from another shotgun blast, quite dead. Then four officers came out of the house, escorting the man himself, who was dressed for the unspeakably hot, humid August weather in a ragged tee-shirt, old shorts, worn sandals, and nothing else. Short, wiry, with an extremely prominent bald-spot in spite of his relatively young age, he had his hands bound behind his back, his wrists cuffed together with plastic cuffs that only became tighter as he struggled. Ghastly, incoherent bellows of joyous hatred erupted from him like hot lava, without a break, in one long bubbling roar, all the way out to the car. There were two officers on each side of him, frog-marching him from the house's front door out to the street where a car was waiting to take him away. But in spite of the fact that any one of the officers would have made two of him, it was almost more than they could do to get him into the car and secure him there without having him hurt some of them in his struggles, or break free and escape . . .

The one thing which all these incidents had had in common was the senseless, pointless malice informing them all: the young punk accosting her in front of the store, her mother turning on her, her father gleefully recounting for his buddies the near-fatal beating which he and some of his friends had given to the hapless homosexual, her brother and his chums rampaging through the town in hot pursuit of an innocent Black man, the stranger happily torturing his girl-friend's baby to death – in every case, their horrible, terrifying rage had been provoked by nothing that seemed even remotely appropriate to the demoniacal, limitless, sensual hatred and anger they'd exhibited. She would have sworn that in each case, the agent of that weird, vile rage knew it had no justification, knew that and had used the nearest excuse – or non-excuse – to indulge it anyway, out of some diabolical lust-to-venge like the craving of a drug addict for whatever poison had become his God. She shuddered in revulsion, remembering, hating them, above all, for the lie it all was – for the pointlessness of this murderous violence, the hypocritical pretense that it had a real point, the lack of concern over the obvious failure of the pretense to convince anyone of its sincerity. Why? why? Who had built a Creation specifically designed never to make sense? Her parents, her brother, the men around her, even at times police, professors, clergy – they were authority, the agents of very God, and all of them delighted in these orgies of rage, or else took them to be completely normal, interpreting any sign of protest against them on any child's or woman's part to be symptomatic of crime, mental illness, or feeble-mindedness (a man foolish enough to voice such sentiments was of course treated as a sort of traitor, or queer).

Once she had had a male friend, a good man, kind and sympathetic. (She had always half-believed him to have dropped out of a flying saucer – one that had come from some other, far better world from very far away.) He was a psychiatrist, and she had gone to him for psychoanalysis, to try to get to the bottom of her seemingly bottomless depressions, her horde of phobias and her often dangerously self-destructive bouts of bulimia and other problems. In the course of her analysis, she had mentioned to her friend, the doctor, her terror, rage, and disgust at such pointless, murderous violence-for-pleasure, and her anger against men – and most women, if truth be told – because of it.

He'd replied that she had only been projecting her own internal sickness onto others, a sickness of unwomanly rage and fear which had its origins in her rejection of the Female Principle. She was, he had told her, just rationalizing her own paranoia and psychoneurotic fantasies of power by imagining that others were doing the ghastly deeds she was imagining in her sick fantasies either to her or to anyone else. He had pointed out to her that this sort of thing simply did not occur in the real world – certainly not to any significant degree. Why, only last year, in response to the ongoing public revulsion against and fear of the very sort of violence that permeated her terrible fantasies, Congress had passed the last of the laws banning the possession of any sort of firearms but basic pump shotguns, and those only for purposes of self-protection and hunting, by anyone but police and the military. All knives other than kitchen cutlery and the like were now prohibited for civilian possession and use, as were, of course, explosives of all kinds, without special permits. Martial-arts schools were now illegal, as was even private instruction in them, except for such practices as tai chi – and those were allowed only under special license. The dreadful tools of the martial artist, including nunchaka, shuriken, cross-bows and heavy-duty single-shot bows, and all their bloody kin were now outlawed everywhere in the land, for possession or use by anyone but those under special government license to teach their use or employ them in government service. The very means of violence had been eliminated in this country! Couldn't she see that with her own eyes? Of course she could! So why couldn't she be a good girl, and accept that the

*world was basically good, that only her own inward soul-sickness made it seem otherwise to her, he had asked her soothingly?*

*He had been such a good friend. . . . At any rate, he really had helped her, in any number of important ways. She had been grateful for it, for his kindness and compassion and all his help, and had been afraid of losing his good regard of her. She didn't want him to tell her that she couldn't come to see him any more. So, feeling guilty about her tabu fantasies, she'd tried hard to accept them as just that, and nothing more. But all that came of her efforts in this direction was that she became more and more filled with baseless, reasonless anger; and when, every time after that, she tried to discuss her problems with him, she couldn't say anything at all, her shame, guilt, anger, and terror of rejection by him – one of the few really good friends she'd ever had – completely gagging all her attempts at speech. Finally, nearly torn apart by the ongoing war within herself between her need to tell him what she really felt and believed and her fear of being rejected by him, she had just given up, drifting away from him, communicating with him less and less, ultimately just never coming back to see him again, without warning or explanation. Since then, she'd never been able to tell anyone about her memories – or fantasies – or all the anger, terror, and pain she still felt in connection with them . . .*

The music of the rails over which they were passing might have changed, as they passed from tracks laid down on gravel, with their old, neglected ties and rust-pitted iron rails, to bright new steel rails with good new redwood ties in beds of clean sand. Or it might have been the sounds of the world outside the car, changing from pastoral silence only underscored by birdsong and windsong and watersong, faint and clean and alive, to train-noise reflected off brick, metal, and wood, and crowd-sounds, and ugly industrial noises. Whichever – perhaps both, perhaps something else entirely – some intrusion from outside, coming to her through gaps in the siding of the car that carried her and the others, must have pulled her out of the dull, aching haze of her depression and evil memories. She sat up, shaking her head to clear away some of the fog, and looked out through a gap in the wooden siding of the car, to see where they'd come to.

The car was now passing through a long, long corridor of barbed-wire fencing. On either side of the train there was barbed-wire fencing, and behind each barbed-wire fence were two more fences, tall and electrified, with signs posted on them every hundred feet or so that warned: “DANGER! HIGH VOLTAGE!” above a large skull-and-crossbones. The eyes of the skulls were filled with luminescent yellow glare, and little jagged bolts of lightning rayed out from the ends of the bones. Between the outer, barbed-wire and middle, electrified fences on each side were men in khaki, wearing gloves, guns, and boots, patrolling with supremely vicious-looking Dobermans and Alsatians on strong chain-link metal leashes.

On her side, she could see that at intervals there stood large billboards behind the second, inward electric fence. One was blue, with a large yellow Star of David on it. Another bore a large black stripe on a white ground; another was all black. Others were red, yellow, or brown, or were white with red, or yellow, or brown stripes on them.

There was one with a white background, bearing a black, stylized logo of a wheelchair and two crutches. Another was white, with images of pills and capsules in various colors, and a stylized line-drawing of a hypodermic syringe. And there was one in white bearing an image in black of a man's head, cracked halfway down to his neck from the crown by a gigantic split in it, apparently caused by an imp hovering just above it that was throwing a lightning bolt labeled “UNREAL THOUGHT.”

One was green with two pink, overlapping Mars symbols – circles with upthrust arrows at 45 angles on them. Another was lavender with two overlapped, yellow Venus symbols, circles with crosses beneath them.

One was a white sign bearing the letters “FOREIGN” in scarlet. Another, also white, had the conventional symbol for “boy-child” on it, done in blue. Another, similar sign bore, instead of the blue “boy-child” symbol, the logo for “girl-child,” done in pink. (Until very recently, much smaller versions of these sign had been posted by cross-walks next to elementary schools all over the country. Such signs no longer graced crosswalks – or anything else – anywhere. The elementary schools were now all rapidly being converted into factories, generally for the making of more munitions, or perhaps biological and chemical warfare materiél. Since the last general elections, such progressive changes, eliminating all sources of inefficiency as quickly as possible, had become common. Progress was a good thing – why did it make her so sad?)

Gradually she realized that for quite a while, the train had been gradually slowing down. Now it was grinding to a halt, pulling up next to a white sign with a green Venus symbol on it. Her car rolled to a stop

right in front of it. Behind the fence next to the train, she could see hundreds, perhaps thousands of despairing or furious, starved and sick, frightened, scarred, and battered women of all ages from early adolescence on up. A song of horror, comprising weeping, cries, shouts, screams, and all the conversations of damned souls in Hell poured from their collective throat like a melody from the open mouth of some satanic saxophone.

A door at the side of the car opened. a stocky, middle-aged woman, wearing a khaki uniform, a semi-automatic pistol in a side-holster, and a badge displaying the honorific "HONORARY MAN," climbed up into the car. She was flanked by a younger woman with a slighter build. The right side and upper lip of the second woman's face was covered with terrible purple keloid scars, and she wore a black eye-patch over her right eye. She was followed into the car by a huge man with enormous, hypertrophied muscles, like a circus strong-man or a muscle-beach jock, his bullet-head completely devoid of hair, including eyebrows. Like the first woman, the second woman and their male companion were dressed in khaki, Sam Browne belts, and heavy black boots. They also carried rifles, tasers, and stunners. They were followed by still another person, of indeterminate sex, dressed similarly; this person carried a nasty-looking military laser, and wore the power-pack for it in a backpack rig.

"All right, girls," growled the first woman, apparently the leader. Her voice would have been strikingly, startlingly lovely if it hadn't been so hoarse. "Out. Now!"

Anna and the others who had journeyed with her filed dispiritedly out of the car, into the night, through gates opened in the fences for them, and up a path to the compound beyond. There was a red glow in the sky beyond it. That must be the zoo that used to be up there when this was the university, it has to be coming from there, thought Anna. But even so, if all the animals that had been in that zoo had been set afire together, in one vast pyre, right now, it could have accounted for only a very little of the smoke that filled the air, clogging their lungs with soot and their minds with its terrible stench of roasting flesh.

Then they turned a corner, and she saw that the smoke was coming from squat, chimneyed brick buildings behind the compounds.

At least, she thought, in her endless depression, at least they spared the zoo . . . *Please, please let them have spared the zoo!* she prayed, to she no longer knew what God.

## 6. New Mutations

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(For information concerning *Expressions of Dread*,  
contact purehades@aol.com)

Old man sitting at a patio table  
Of a sidewalk café  
In the cool blue Manhattan evening,  
Savoring his drink,  
Savoring his memories –  
Tall glass full of ice and Coca-Cola in his hand,  
Gleaming rainbowed shards of ice  
Floating in brown syrup,  
Gives a better kick than coffee  
(Though not as good as Jolt,  
But they don't serve Jolt here),  
Leg doing a rapid shimmy under the table,  
Remember, remember,  
Fond memories –  
The boy was so beautiful, he was,  
All morning-fair skin, soft down, red lips,  
Young innocent erection  
Like a one-fingered benediction from Eros –  
The way his neck cracked under the crushing pressure  
Of lasciviously murderous hands  
Felt like teeth crunching into chilled celery  
Or the ice floating in this glass of Coke,  
So nice, so nice,  
Heart tasted so good,  
Ripped it, still beating and warm,  
From his heaving chest,  
Delicate taste of blood and clean meat,  
So good, so good,  
Orgasm shimmering rainbowed light  
When he died, still trying to beg for life,  
Joyous psychedelic skyburst wonder  
Like the acid I never took when it was good,  
When Leary and all the others  
Sang endless praise-songs to the great God Ellesdee –  
Buried him there,  
Back there in the sheltering, concealing brush,  
Under the voluptuously molten azure August sky,  
There in the hills behind Santa Barbara,  
No witnesses, soil shallow,  
Dug the grave with hands alone,  
Fondling the sandy stuff  
Like a lover's balls.  
He was just 8, so good, so good –  
Veal for an old man's educated palate –  
The *paté de foie gras*, now, well,  
That was no *gras*,  
Instead *un jeun garçon*,

Found him in that parking lot,  
 No one was looking, no one nearby,  
 Beautiful boy, skin like burnt-umber silk,  
 Short, tightly-curled locks of hair  
 Gilded and made molten by Sunlight –  
 Enticed him into the car,  
 Don't remember now (remember now!)  
 How, drove him home,  
 Got him into that spare back room,  
 Knocked him out,  
 Nailed his feet and hands to boards,  
 For days stuffed him with wild rice, white wine,  
 Mushrooms, red wine,  
 Herbs and savories, cornmeal, greens,  
 Used a stick to ram it down his throat  
 When he tried to keep from swallowing it,  
 Wouldn't let him vomit, mock-strangled him  
 Every time he began to retch,  
 Conditioned him into cooperating,  
 Kept him there for ten days,  
 Bent over the wooden rail,  
 Feet nailed to boards on the floor on one side,  
 Hands to upright struts on the other,  
 Bugged him so many times,  
 Lost count, lost count in the psychedelic fog,  
 The bliss, the ecstasy of moans and pleas,  
 Kept him there, naked, for ten days,  
 Cleaned him, washed him down,  
 Whenever he pissed or shat,  
 Kept him there until all the toxic residues  
 Of life in the big city, an all-American diet,  
 Had been pushed out of his sweet young body  
 By the meal, the herbs, the wine –  
 On the 11th day, we rested,  
 Cut his throat like a born *shoschet*,  
 Drank his claret blood,  
 Rarest of vintages! Wine of youth,  
 Then cleaned and dressed him out,  
 Roasted him whole,  
 So good, so good . . .  
 So nice, he was 6 years old, so good . . .  
 And for a change of pace  
 (Remember! Remember –  
 Before the Great Darkness  
 Closes in for good  
 And your mother's hateful God  
 Condemns you to an eternity  
 Of never-explained torture!)  
 There was the time we procured  
 The services of a couple of fine lads  
 To bring us a young lady –  
 Sweet, ripe, skin like milk,  
 Hair like April sunlight,  
 Eyes like Northern skies –

A young lady, a change of pace  
For our jaded palate –  
First one they tried,  
Came up beside her  
Where she was parked by the curb,  
Couldn't get out,  
One of my boys – the one on the passenger side –  
Opened the door of their Tempest,  
Started to get out, to pull her out of her van,  
Take her with them to me –  
And the bitch had this gun!  
Suddenly had it up, stuck in his face,  
He managed to jump back in the Tempest  
Just as his partner gunned the engine  
To pull out of there.  
So they cruised around a while,  
Finally found a chick  
Sitting in her car by the side of the road,  
Dreaming her life away (!),  
Listening to some moon-June-spoon-loon tune  
About all the things the Good Ol' Boys push  
In order to keep themselves fat & happy –  
Got up beside her, asked her questions,  
Lulled her suspicions long enough  
For each of my boys to get out  
And come around, one to each side  
Of her two-door cheapjack tinjap car –  
They brought her to me in a sack,  
Naked and bound tight with barbed wire,  
Cringing, whimpering,  
Bruises covering her moon-colored body  
Like ink dropped onto snow,  
Jizz covering her thighs and belly  
And throat and mouth and chest and head –  
Oh, she kept me busy, there beneath the house  
(The one in Santa Barbara, of course,  
I stay here 'cause I don't shit in my own back yard!),  
Down there in the rumpus room, heh!,  
Kept me busy for three delicious days,  
Used the whip, the club, the gag-and-bit,  
The bone-saws, the prods, the blowtorch, the acid,  
The awl and screwdriver and all the other delightful toys,  
And when I was done, paid the boys to take what was left  
And drop it in the ocean,  
Put it in a Hefty bag weighted down  
With about a hundred pounds worth of Qwik-Set,  
Guess they did a good job,  
Never got back to me –  
And there was Junior, paid him to rape and kill  
A whole series of chicks, old, young,  
Fat, thin, tall, short,  
Come back to us and give us the details –  
Oh, so good, so good . . .  
But the little boys are best, are best, are best,



Mommy, do you ever look up from hell  
And see just what you set in motion?  
Does Grandpa rape you there again and again  
Like he did when you were little,  
Like he did me when I was a boy?  
Does Daddy know what I do, I do,  
What we do here, me, myself, I,  
And Jesus and all the Boys,  
And the Boss, the Master,  
And all of Satan's Crew?  
– Coke is finished, don't smoke any more,  
Nothing left to do but pay the tip and leave . . .  
So let's go for a stroll down Manhattan streets  
Through the lovely twilight  
Before going back to the car,  
Before driving back to Chas Addams Lawn Guyland quietude,  
Back to California-style pad underneath my business partner's house,  
Back to bedroom like a time-capsule,  
Berkeley in the '60s,  
Walls covered with John and Ringo and Paul,  
Morrison, Jagger, and The Mamas & the Papas –  
With gorgeous California blond 16-year-old surf bums  
Forever riding the curl, forever cock-teasing,  
Lovely sons of bitches who never wanted me,  
God damn their beautiful, untouchable hides! –  
Let's stay here on mean streets for a while,  
Go over to 42nd Street,  
Stroll past the porno theaters  
That used to be cinematic palaces,  
Proves how shitty civilization is,  
Just what Grandpa told me,  
Jesus comes, He'll burn all this out,  
Gut it, teach all those soft, decadent,  
Working-class, middle-class, rich-bitch assholes  
They can't get away with this!  
No, can't get away, can't get away,  
Can't get away from Grandpa,  
Run to the rock, the Black rock,  
The Black Grandpa hated,  
Run to the rock, but there's no hidin' place down here,  
Harlem won't have me and Manhattan's too full,  
The stupid niggers think I love 'em,  
Yeah, sure I do,  
About as much as I do the bitches, the cows, the sluts,  
Moony Egyptian sluts,  
About as much as the cats I used to catch and –  
*“All right, mo'fuck.” Voice from the shadows  
Behind him. Arm like a mahogany-colored steel vise  
Suddenly encircling his chest,  
Cutting off wind, almost can't breathe,  
Tries to struggle as he is dragged farther into the shadows,  
Kicking weakly as air-hunger fills him like nueé ardent  
From Pelean eruption of unpredicted, improbability, Erisian disruption –  
Into open door of van, slammed onto floor,*

200 pounds of primo-condition 20-year old male  
Kneeling on his torso, clamping his wrists tight behind his back,  
He can breathe now – sort of, with all that weight on top of him –  
But hurts too much to move. Hands patting him down –  
“What do we gots here?” Gleeful,  
As wallet is pulled from trouser-pocket.  
“Get the honky’s wallet, we’ll put him  
And everything else into the river.”  
From the front seat of the van.  
“Look, Les’, I – wait a minute.”  
“What’choo want?”  
“I got a better idea.”  
“Whaffuck?”  
“This is the guy Marvin said  
Was the last one seen wit’  
My little brother when Joey disappeared.  
Remember? – Don’ move, asshole!”  
Knee on the back of his neck, now.  
No chance to escape, not now.  
Point of knife pricks a rhetorical question  
Into his armpit. “Say what, mo’fuck?  
Here? Right now? You want me to  
Do you right here?” asks the knife.  
“No.” “Aw . . .”  
“Say, I also heard this guy been seen wit’  
A buncha people disappeared,  
Like kids, even one old man,  
Never seen again. What do you think?”  
“You right. I heard t’at, too –  
Yeah, t’is stuffin his wallet checks,  
Says he lives out t’ere on the Island.  
– Whaffuck? He also gotta place  
Out t’ere in California!  
Lookee here, gots it right here  
On his driver’s license!”  
“Shee-it! Reg’lar worl’ traveler,  
Ain’t he? Well, Mistah Worl’ travelin’ honky asshole,  
I think I got an idee about what to do wit’ you . . .”  
– Firemen found him about three days later,  
Stripped naked, crucified upside down  
Against an inside wall  
Of one of those old, abandoned warehouses  
Down there in the South Bronx,  
When they went in to make sure  
The place wasn’t burning from the trash-fires  
Some kids had lit nearby.  
Acrid, greasy smoke from mattress-fires  
Filling the air, a pall fit for the devil himself,  
Overcast skies mourning the end of innocence.  
He’d been staple-gunned to the wooden wall in there,  
Rather cleverly, none of the staples  
Went through any major blood-vessels:  
Ankles, wrists, elbows, knees.  
Naked – but covered in a sultry, heaving

*Velvet blanket of fat flies,  
Buzzing like the retinue of Beelzebub.  
Whoever had skinned him, neck to knees,  
Had been real good at it –  
Forensics determined he'd lived for quite a while  
After whoever'd done it was through.  
– Maybe it was shock from the blow-torch  
Played over his genital area some time later  
That finished him off. . .*

## 7. Satisfaction: A Comedy

### Chapter 1: *La Doña del Misterio*

“I tell you, Father Luis, it is true! There is a woman living close by my village who is almost certainly at least a century old, if not much, much more than that, a very, very *wealthy* woman, a woman who owns and controls a vast estate, filled with cattle and rich crops tended by many, many workers – and does it all with no man of her own station in evidence whatsoever.” The speaker hit the table before him for emphasis, though with a great deal less heat than he would have if the man he was now speaking to had not been a priest. In spite of his emphatic tone and eerie tale, however, his hard little eyes stayed level and focused unwaveringly on the other man with the steady, considering gaze of an experienced businessman driving hard to close a deal.

The priest, a young Dominican who acted as a secretary for Sevilla’s local office of the Holy Inquisition, was sick unto death of dealing with hysterics braying about Satanic invasions, running like terrified children to hide behind the skirts of Mother Church, and spiteful neighbors or relatives out for revenge by bringing accusations of heresy and crypto-Judaism against the targets of their wrath, hoping thereby to plunge them into the hideous torments of the Question. This weasel-faced little rodent of an informer didn’t seem to fall into either class, however; he was almost certainly out for whatever material reward the Church might give him for his Judas-work. Even so, that didn’t necessarily mean that he knew what he was talking about, or that he was telling the truth – or, for that matter, that he had all his ponies solidly in his corral, either, certification of which condition the story he had been telling the priest for the past several minutes certainly didn’t insure.

“Jorge,” he asked the other man, sighing wearily, “what – what evidence do you have for this fantastic assertion you have just made? – Not that I doubt your word, my son, but these matters involve a great deal of checking and ascertaining matters of fact. Before we can act on any such claim, we *must* have reasonable grounds to do so – that is, the Church must have some sort of definite, ah, indications, something we can *point* to, that would convince a disinterested observer that there is at least *something* to the claim, that it is worth following up and acting upon. Do you see?”

“Whether I, personally, believe you or not – and of course I believe you, my son, I see that you are a true son of Mother Church” – *a greedy little pig who would sell his own children to the Moors for a handful of silver, and who may be stark, raving mad in the bargain*, Father Luis thought sourly, mentally crossing himself for lying, albeit to this vicious, shifty-eyed little monster whom he doubted was loved even by Our Lord – “still,” the priest continued, “I have to follow forms and carry out the orders of my superiors. This helps us to weed out ambiguous cases, so that we may concentrate our efforts and our resources upon those cases that clearly involve true heresy.”

“Father, perhaps if I were to tell you, in detail, how I drew the conclusions I have just related to you, it would be helpful?”

“Surely, my son. Please begin.” Luis leaned back in his chair, steeped his hands and put on a faint, polite face that artfully concealed the weary disgust lying beneath it while Jorge began his tale.

“For many, many generations,” Jorge began, “across the river from the village where I live, about ten leagues north of Sevilla, there has been a vast estate, the wealth of which is nearly inconceivable, even in comparison to the holdings of the Crown or the many fine holdings of Mother Church herself. On it is a splendid villa, a place of great beauty and substance. As far back as anyone has memories or accounts from grandparents still remembered there, *women* have owned that estate and managed it themselves, all alone.

“Now, the people of my village are peasants and small-holders. They farm, run cattle and sheep on their lands, cultivate vineyards, or orchards bearing those fine little olives that grow so well here. Generally speaking, they are not wealthy people, but neither are any of them poor, for the land there is bountiful, the weather generally good, and life rich and rewarding for most of us who live there . . .”

As Jorge continued his tale, the young priest gradually lost his bored inattentiveness. He sat up, becoming more alert with every word, and soon began to take notes. Jorge’s tale unfolded like something out of a fairy-story, but the salient points were exactly the sort of thing in which both the Church and the Crown were highly interested.

For many generations, on the whole the people of Jorge's village had been kindly people who tended to their own business, lived virtuous, quiet lives, went to Mass on Sunday and Holy Days, and spent their days in productive pursuits. Thus they did not trouble their minds about the occupants and owners of the beautiful villa on the great estates just across the river from the village.

For generations, as far as the villagers knew, a series of great ladies had lived in the villa, mother passing the land down to daughter, who in turn passed it on to her daughter, unendingly, through the terms of some ancient title. These ladies rarely appeared in public, but they were always ready to help out with goods, money, and skilled labor when need arose among those who lived in the village, such as occurred during times of unusually harsh winters, flooding of the mountain river that tumbled through the valley where the village lay, or some other crisis. They were very grateful for the aid, and greatly appreciated the lack of interference with their lives by any of the ladies; and they repaid the kindness and respect which the ladies of the villa showed to them with such small kindnesses they could offer in return – above all, their respect for the privacy of the villa's inhabitants, in return for that shown to them by those same inhabitants.

For nine-and-ninety years this relationship between the people of the village and their wealthy neighbors across the river persisted unchanged. But now a new wind was blowing through Spain and, indeed, all of Europe. Catastrophic change was in the air. Europe's population swung from plague-ravaged remnants to dense concentrations of people and back, up and down, like a wildly gyrating pendulum. New ideas were beginning to permeate the oppressive, unchanging consensus of previous centuries like sunlight breaking through an eternal, iron weight of cloud. Church and Crown became intertwined like lustful vipers, and even arguments in bars over obscure points of religion or law in some cases became fuel for the flames of the Autos de Fe, the greasy smoke of which often filled the air across Europe like that from vast, continent-spanning pork roasts as those condemned for heresy or treason (though there wasn't much difference between the two, now, in the eyes of the authorities) screamed out their last agonized breaths amid the leaping fires of theocratic judgment.

And almost overnight, it seemed, a new breed of men sprang up in Spain, as elsewhere, like a plague of two-legged toadstools. A few of them even appeared in the isolated little village next to the river. Opportunistic men, with their eyes on the main chance and little concern for almost anyone or anything else other than their own hides, they began to snuffle around like jackals looking for choice scraps of carrion, ferreting out juicy secrets and tasty tidbits of information and casting about for potential buyers for the morsels of scandal, innuendo, hint, and rumor which they had gathered in this way.

One such was this same little hyena, Jorge, who now stood before Father Luis, telling his incredible tale. Jorge, a man of dubious antecedents, had come to the village from places unknown, tattered, tired, and hunted-looking. Most of the villagers, like their ancestors before them, were still kindly, generous-hearted people; so Jorge was duly taken in, fed, and given work with a farming family. Gradually, through one bit of chicanery and sleight-of-hand after another, he somehow acquired enough capital and/or influence – it was never quite sure which – to acquire title to a piece of land of his own, in that part of the village closest to the river, and thus as close as possible to the villa on its vast estates across the river from the village.

Jorge thereupon set about trying to establish a successful farm. But he knew little about farming – or indeed, any other productive, respectable occupation – and his experiment in land-ownership and -management was now definitely foundering. Perhaps at least partly to rescue himself from the financial and other binds he was now in, he wanted very much to marry the daughter of the village butcher. For this, he needed to be able to convince her father, a pious, virtuous, affluent man, well-established and highly respected in the parish, that he could provide well for the girl's future. In any event, he now needed money. A great deal of it. And he wasn't the sort of man who would have very many scruples about how he got it.

As Father Luis had already concluded, Jorge was the sort of greedy pig who would have sold his own mother to the Devil for a clipped gold *real* and not wasted so much as a tear or a thought about it afterward. Somewhere along the way, it obviously must have occurred to Jorge that certain scraps of information he'd been slowly piecing together over the previously several years since he'd come to live in the village by the river might be very attractive to certain parties – attractive enough to make him, if not actually wealthy, then at least very well off.

Continuing to mentally translate and edit Jorge's words into something closer to the truth as he listened, Father Luis was now taking in the little man's tale in enthralled silence. Between Jorge's report and Father Luis's inward translation thereof, in essence the story was as follows.

Since Jorge had come to the village, he had heard much about the mysterious ladies who lived in the great villa across the river, their wealth, their charity, their aid to the village. He himself had only seen anything of those great ladies but once, and then only from a great distance – which, he gathered, was the general experience of the villagers over the past century or so. Mysteries intrigued Jorge, not only because they might at some point make opportunities for wealth through the careful exploitation of the secrets of others, but also for their own sake, for the subtle pleasure which unraveling them brought him. Jorge was a man who loved to ferret out secrets as others loved chasing women and still others, strong drink. So he began to ask around the village, here and there, and soon learned the following fascinating facts:

The ladies of the villa all bore a striking family resemblance – all of them had smoky-gray, moonstone eyes, skin white as ivory, lips and nails the color of dawn's first blush on a summer morning, the ripe, full bodies of young women in their prime. All of them also, however, had hair, lashes, and eyebrows the color of new-fallen snow – but full-bodied, lustrous, silken hair, like that of a young woman, not the poor, thin remnants of an old crone. Curiously, the daughters all seemed to inherit the estate well before their mothers had died or even aged noticeably. For six or seven generations, now, mothers abdicated the management of the estate while still in their prime to daughters who had just reached their first maturity. And in all cases, the daughters looked enough like their mothers to have been their twin sisters, instead.

These ladies never seemed to suffer any misfortune. Apparently they led charmed lives – and perhaps immortal ones, too, since none of them ever seemed to age a day before she was replaced by the next one in line. Finally, there was the odd fact that no *men* ever put in an appearance on the estate, other than the common laborers who did the heavy work there, or professionals such as physicians, whose services the residents of the villa required from time to time (rumor had it that at least one of the physicians who were occasionally called to the villa was also an alchemist – and perhaps a sorcerer, Jorge added in a parenthetical aside). Didn't *any* of those great ladies ever marry, for Jesus' sweet sake? Or have sons? Or other male relatives? And how could mere *women* hold title to land like that? These weren't abbesses, with jurisdiction over an abbey, or Mothers Superior, similarly empowered to govern the lives of their cloistered charges. Surely the Church hadn't sanctioned their establishment – nor was it likely the Crown had, either! And my, what lovely, lovely holdings they had, too – hundreds, perhaps thousands of acres of prime land for grazing cattle or sheep, vast orchards and equally vast croplands, vineyards that seemed to turn the entire eastern horizon purple during the summer! And the gorgeous carriages they rode during their rare visits in person to the village – why, even Their Majesties could have possessed nothing more splendid for their royal processions, displaying for all the might and majesty of Spain! And the horses that pulled the ladies' carriages – once, just *once* he had seen them, from afar, but it was clear that even the fabulous Moorish steeds legend said had been taken from the Alhambra when Spain finally recovered it were nothing compared to these incomparable beasts, the conformation of the horses of Moorish kings, the color of the Moon! And the tales he had heard about the ladies' gowns, virtually dripping with silver trim, and their coral and moonstone jewelry, and the enormous pearls with which their gowns and shawls and even the upholstery of their carriages were brocaded, and –

Jorge thought over all he had learned about the ladies of the villa, carefully sifting through the logic of the patterns emerging out of the intelligence about them he had amassed over the years. When he was completely sure about what he had come to suspect from circumstantial evidence, he went to talk with a priest – and the word on the tip of his tongue was *Alumbrada*, mystic or magician, *Illuminata* . . . or even *Marrana*, a secret Jewess, and perhaps one of the dreaded Kabbalistas, to boot!

– He did not go with his dread surmise of Father Diego, a good-hearted old soul who had been the village's parish priest for nearly forty years. Father Diego, like most of his parishioners, had no slightest suspicion that their neighbors to the east, across the river from the village, might not be all that they should be, or was generally claimed for them. Perhaps his very good-heartedness, or the encroachments of old age, blinded the sweet old priest to the presence of peril and true evil in the world. . . . No, Father Diego just wouldn't have *understood*, somehow, Jorge felt. So instead, he went to the good fathers in Sevilla, to the court of the Grand Inquisitor, Fernando de Valdeo, himself, a whole day's journey away, to ask them what they thought of his suspicions.

What Jorge had come to believe was that, rather than a succession of women, mother followed in turn by daughter, then granddaughter, occupying the villa and managing the estate, there had been just *one* woman all along, who had somehow managed to escape not only the ravages of age and illness but indeed any sort of major trouble at all for a century of residence there, and who in addition held land *in her own right and*

*power*. This was the *only* scenario which fit all the facts. But how could *any* mortal woman ever manage to preserve her youthful beauty and her health unchanged for so long a period, or evade all trouble and woe all that time?

It was impossible – *unless*, Jorge speculated, unless that woman had somehow established communion with those alien, shadow realms which Mother Church so wisely forbade all her children to traffick with! Could *that* be it? Had she – had she, long ago, begun dabbling in Black Magick, and made a pact with some foul minion of the Evil One? Was *that* it? If so, she was an *Alumbrada*, indeed – and a soul in mortal danger of eternal damnation! Why, it was his bounden duty to save her from herself! Yes, *that* was it – he would go to the learned brothers in Sevilla, the Dominicanos, and he would tell them about her, and ask them what *they* thought. Surely *they* would have an answer, with all their learning and their experience of spiritual matters!

. . . It was unfortunate, he reminded himself, that the priests he was thinking of also happened to be part of an arm of the Holy Inquisition, the Scourge by which the true children of Christ were protected from heresy and the wiles of Satan. Oh, yes. But they were, indeed, the most learned men anywhere around, weren't they? Certainly far, far more so – at least on such fine points of moral theology as he had been debating with himself – than poor, senile old Father Diego was or ever could have been. (And, unlike Father Diego, they would not be apt to tell his neighbors in the village just who it was that had made it known to the officers of the Holy Question that they might have an interest in the generous benefactrices who had for so long constantly protected, aided, and abided with the village and its people through all weathers. But of course, that was the last possible thought on Jorge's mind concerning this matter. Of course it was!)

Accordingly, Jorge saddled up his best mule and loaded his second-best one with provisions for several days, and off he went to Sevilla to talk with the good priests established there at the Dominican Monastery of San Diego, which just happened to house the Office of the Inquisition. He felt very good about his mission of mercy. (Of course, that had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that if his suspicions turned out to be correct, Mother Church, as she generally did in such cases, would reward him for the virtuous concern over whatever devil-possessed person actually lived in the villa across the river from his village with a very respectable portion of her land and goods, the latter of course being forfeit to the Church as they always were in proven cases of unrepentant heresy. Of course it didn't!)

So here was Jorge now, standing before Father Luis, reporting his mad-sounding tale with such unctuously innocent concern. The nasty little man was neither stupid nor mad, however, and was quite clearly very sure that when the Church came to investigate the facts, the facts would bear him out.

"My son," Father Luis solemnly told Jorge, "I would like you to put up here in town for a few days, so that you may talk with my superiors about this. We will be more than happy to stable your mules and provision you for your ride home, of course. Would this be agreeable with you?"

Jorge quickly agreed, bobbing his head rapidly in thanks like some scruffy, manic little bird. Father Luis then rose from behind his desk and, bidding Jorge wait for him there in the study, went to find his superior and ask him to come in and listen to Jorge's tale.

## ***Chapter 2: Una Problema de Innocencia***

Several days later, Jorge returned to his village looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his primly smiling mouth, his hind mule nearly staggering under a load of tools purchased in Sevilla for his farm. Neither avoiding nor seeking out his neighbors, as was his usual wont, he went about his business as he always did, bothering no one but neither doing much to help anyone, either – and with his ears always glued to the nearest neighbor's wall, his shifty little eyes prying everywhere for unguarded indiscretions. No one had reason to remark upon his absence, since he had made such trips several times in the past, for business reasons.

So when the Dominicanos suddenly appeared in the village a fortnight later, accompanied by a full company of Archbishop Fernando's soldiers, looking for the inhabitants of the estate across the river, no one connected the disastrous invasion with weaselly little Jorge, nor even took notice of him. Their entire concern was with the terrifying thing that had suddenly overtaken their formerly pleasant, orderly, fruitful

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little world, soldiers bursting in everywhere, followed by the Inquisitores, interrogating all and sundry, even small children, threatening people with the most horrifying tortures if they did not turn the people of the grand estate across the river over to them at once. The soldiers appropriated all the winter stores of the village for their own use, killed off livestock belonging to villagers to provision themselves, fouled the lovely little river when they rode through its shallows on their great horses or used it while voiding their bladders or bowels, and, in not a few cases, made lewd and improper remarks to the girls and women of the village, as well. But only for a day or two. For soon it became clear that there was nothing to be learned about the owners and tenants of the estate from the villagers, who really had very little knowledge of what went on across the river or who really lived there. And so the priests and monks and their soldier escort finally left the village, casting dire threats at the villages in their wake as they went, and made their way across the river to the vast, wealthy estate with its splendid villa that lay there – and whoever or whatever it was that denned there.

Soon they were returning through the village, making their way down the road to Sevilla with their captive, a beautiful, ivory-fleshed woman with a great silken mane of pure white hair and moonstone eyes who wore only a thin white shift that barely covered her nakedness, trussed up in a mule-cart like some common felon. She was Dona Ynes Ana Ysabel Gabriel Miguel Sanches y Lopes, and her family had lived there on that great estate next to the river for uncounted generations, good, God-fearing Christians and loyal Spaniards, every one. – Or so said she and her retainers, the latter now either scattered to the hills, or lying in bloody, broken heaps on the devastated grounds of her estate, or, like her, prisoners of the Archbishop, chained together wrist-to-wrist and ankle-to-ankle and marched along at sword's-point in the same column of soldiers and monks guarding the mule-drawn cart now carrying Dona Ynes inexorably toward the dungeons of the Inquisition.

But if Dona Ynes and her people were all such good Christians, where were the baptismal records, the family annals, that would have proven her claims? Where, for that matter, were the documents of title to her land from the Crown that gave her the right to her land? Nowhere had any such proof of her claim been found, nor had anyone yet come forth to present it.

Behind the ranks of marching soldiers and priests and monks and their charges the gates of the great estate lay smashed and broken, the cattle, sheep, and goats that had grazed on its far-flung pasturage scattered or slaughtered as provisions or rounded up and taken along in train by the soldiers. The courtyards of the splendid villa that had graced the estate lay in chaos, overturned furniture mingled with shards of shattered porcelain, chunks of broken marble, shredded clothing and drapery, and overturned tuns of wine and containers of food. The graceful alabaster pillars that had upheld the porticos and arched colonnades and the ceilings surrounding the skylights of the atria lay in shattered ruins beneath the sagging ceilings and entablatures they had supported for so long, so well. The numerous paintings, of every conceivable subject (more often than not those which Mother Church in her wisdom had set off-limits to the faithful), that had lined many of the interior walls of the villa had been hacked and slashed to ribbons and broken pieces of wood, or obscenely defaced with black paint; the lovely hardwood paneling over those walls had been cruelly defaced as well with blade and fire and offal and even slops from the latrine. Before the huge barn that had housed the beasts of the estate the priests and monks had set blazing a gigantic bonfire fueled by countless books and scrolls, part of an enormous library discovered within the villa. (There were whispered rumors among those that had been in the Dominicanos' retinue that fateful day that many of those books had had to do with dark arts and alien worlds, devil's work – and others that however diabolical the ones that had been decently burned in the bonfire before the barn might have been, the ones which the Inquisitores had carried away with them to study later on were far, far worse. Many of the latter, it was told, were in strange, snake-like writing, the language of the Moors, the learned Dominicanos had said, a sure sign of heretical leaning.)

No one in the village saw Dona Ynes, whom the Inquisitores had taken from them so disastrously, ever again. None ever heard exactly what happened to her, though rumors concerning her fate abounded for many years afterward. The diffident, polite distrust with which most of the villagers had always regarded the authorities of Church and Crown now quickly turned to hate – a matter which went almost unnoticed by those august men, however, so many were the troubles of Spain at this time.

It was not long after her arrest before Dona Ynes was being chivvied along by several of the soldiers to stand before the man who was to be her judge. This man, a Dominican protonotary apostolic, was noted for his unusually harsh judgments and lack of leniency even among the Dominicanos, who were famous for the



tenacity with which they worked to protect Mother Church and her people, and their unswerving dedication to their cause – with very little regard for whatever damage they might do in pursuit of their objectives.

Now, Father Bendito, for so the judge was named, surreptitiously flicked his tongue across his full, red lips like a hungry cat sighting a baby bird just fallen from the nest upon seeing the beautiful Dona Ynes standing sullenly before him, all but naked in her thin, ragged, white penitential shift. Dona Ynes had the manners of a great lady – and the voluptuous body and looks of some legendary courtesan. Bendito found the combination irresistible. Even her chronic habit of calling him, with some sarcasm, “Padre Bendicho,” failed to detract from her overwhelming charms.

The charges against her were read out to him by an assistant, one of the friars that had accompanied the expedition to arrest Dona Ynes: “*Alumbrachismo*, consisting of trafficking in unsavory arts to gain earthly immortality, against God’s law, and suspicion of practicing rites of Musselmanic origin, thus repudiating the conversion to Christianity of your ancestors and furthering the abominable worship of Satan promoted by the evil Mahound and his damned followers.” These were followed by the details of the circumstances of the case, related to the court by Father Luis, who had accompanied the detail that had gone to take Dona Ynes in charge. While Luis droned on, Bendito, steepling his hands before him, appeared to ponder the matter. When Luis had done, rolling up the parchment on which he had written up the brief of the case with a rather melodramatic flourish, Bendito waited a few more moments in silence, stretching out the suspense, then said, “You know, these *Alumbradas* can be very dangerous. *Very* dangerous. We must get to the bottom of this, and as soon as possible. I therefore wish to put Dona Ynes to at least the preliminary form of the Question at the earliest possible time tomorrow, in a special chamber here near the dungeons, below this very room. I will have my regular assistants aid in the process, as usual – but there will be some necessary irregularities due to the special nature of this woman and the risks involved.”

The eyebrows of many of those present were elevated at this last declaration. But Bendito’s only added to it, “I will explain more tomorrow. In the meantime, take this, ah, woman down to a cell and secure her there, and then we shall adjourn for a meal and our regular duties and devotions until the morrow.”

Grumbling a little at not being made privy to Bendito’s strategy, the others left, all save one. This was a very young priest, rather new to his vows, Father Inocente, whom Bendito asked to remain behind for a moment.

“Yes, Father Bendito?” asked Inocente, once the others had gone. “What did you want to see me about?”

“Come here, my son, and I will tell you.”

Bendito beckoned. The younger man came over to him, and they began to talk in low tones. As they did, Inocente, a beautiful young man with the face of a Botticelli angel and the brimstone eyes and soul of a true son of Satan, began to grin, more and more widely as they conversed. Finally Bendito joined Inocente, his perfect, porcelain-white teeth flashing ironically between his cherry-stain lips. Finished at last with his instructions, Bendito clasped the younger man’s broad shoulders with fierce affection and bade him a good rest, so that Inocente would have all his strength for tomorrow’s exertions. As the bells rang the Angelus, the two priests shook hands and went their separate ways, both still smiling broadly in anticipation of tomorrow’s work.

### **Chapter 3: *Auto da Fe***

So it was that the next day Bendito, Inocente and three Dominican monks, escorted by a small detail of guardsmen, conducted the woman with the smoke-grey eyes and the snow-white clouds of hair from her dungeon cell directly beneath Bendito’s ground-floor offices to a room far below even the deepest of the dungeons of the Inquisitorial headquarters, in an almost forgotten dank sub-basement of the building. The room’s lichen-covered rock walls eternally oozed slimy gray-brown rivulets of frigid water, and its filthy floor, paved with broken slabs of sandstone, made for treacherous footing. In the dark corners of the room were small heaps of indeterminate nature – piles of rat-dung, perhaps . . . or possibly something much worse. The room’s cold, noisome darkness was only a little alleviated by smoky torches placed in sconces around the rocky walls, giving off a bitter red light like the fires of Gehenna. An enormous door made of slabs of oak faced with sheet-iron, secured by thick wrought-iron bolts, gave on the sole entrance. A low beam of thick chestnut ran the length of the room, down the middle, held some seven feet off the floor by oak

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stanchions securely bolted to the slimy floor. Almost directly under the beam and somewhat off the room's exact center were a charcoal brazier, filled with red-hot coals and a large table covered with ominous-looking instruments, many of which were thickly crusted with dried blood or bruised with rainbow-edged, blackened areas, testimonies of extreme heating. Beneath the table was a very low, plain wooden foot-stool about half the length of a tall man's foot high. A stench compounded of filth, fear, and some indescribably alien foulness, so powerful it seemed to assault the soul itself, permeated the air of the room, as if it were exuded by the room's very walls; upon first encountering it, all three of the monks reeled back from the doorway, nauseated and appalled.

First, Bendito dismissed the soldiers. "Surely, gentlemen, even a few mere priests can handle one woman – albeit an extremely beautiful, intelligent, and clever one who, mayhap, communes with strange, unholy powers. Go, in the name of Jesus – surely no harm can come to us from one lone woman . . . at least, not any which earthly, mortal men-at-arms could protect us from!"

Sighing, the officer in charge of the guards ceased his protests and ordered his men to leave the room, leaving the room with them.

Once the soldiers were gone, Bendito then turned to the three monks who had accompanied him and Inocente, who flanked the woman who waited despondently, hands bound behind her back, one perfect white breast almost falling out of her shift, great purple bruises on her face and arms beginning to shade into ochre and green, for whatever Bendito and the others had planned for her. "Good Brothers in Christ Juan, Xavier, Pablo – please, I request your assistance in securing this woman in a special way, to render her unable to wield any demonic powers whatsoever, assuming she possesses them. I realize that what I am about to ask you to assist in is not commonly done with patients of the Holy Office of the Question, but believe me, it is absolutely necessary in this case."

So, with misgivings, but not willing to question the orders of a superior, the three monks did as he bade. Herding Dona Ynes over to where the overhead beam crossed the room, they made her stand directly under it while Bendito, a tall man made taller still by standing on the stool that had been under the table, manacled her hands to the beam by means of chains bolted to its middle, put there for that purpose, and Inocente bent to secure her ankles in similar wise by shackles fixed to the floor with thick iron staples. When they had finished, Dona Ynes, who was herself very tall for a woman, stood with legs held splayed widely apart by her chains, her hands manacled to the beam directly above her head, so that she was completely powerless to move at all save for her head, her fingers, and her toes. Already panting with terror in anticipation of whatever torments were to come, she seemed nearly overcome with dread. Her flesh, normally white as snow, seemed even paler now, if that were possible. She closed her eyes, in resignation or perhaps a stupor of fear, but she didn't sway in her chains – she couldn't, for she was far too tightly trussed.

When the job was done, Bendito once more faced the monks, saying, "Brothers, my good friends in Christ our Lord, I must now ask the three of you to leave this room. – No, no, I realize how irregular this is," he said, holding up a hand to forestall their protests. "But you must understand that if this woman is, as we suspect, not just a heretic – which it is abundantly clear she is, of course, from her huge library of forbidden works and certain correspondence which we found in the study of the villa on her estate and confiscated as evidence in her case – but in fact an actual sorceress, one who has dedicated her very soul to the Evil One in exchange for favors from the diabolic realms, as well, then just to be in her mere presence is to risk the possibility of losing one's own soul to the same eternal perdition for which she herself is now at risk when her mortal term finally comes to an end. It could be that what she would reveal under the Question would so vile, so spiritually perilous, that anyone who hears it would be in danger of eternal torment and exile from the love of Jesus Christ our Lord and His loving Father, the most merciful Creator. If you doubt this, you have only to ask Father Inocente, here –" He gestured to indicate his young colleague, who lowered his eyes modestly and smiled. "Father Inocente has had much training in such matters, and can confirm what I tell you here."

"So: I must stay, for this is my responsibility, to learn from this woman all that can be learned of the evil ways she clearly has fallen into, in order to apply whatever corrections are most likely to bring her back to the love and forgiveness and compassionate mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord. And Father Inocente, here –" Again he gestured to indicate the younger man, who stood at the woman's other side, smiling faintly as he studied the grim machinery arrayed on the little table with evident great interest. "Father Inocente will stay, too, for he has been trained as an exorcist –" For an instant, Inocente looked up from the table and its ominous burden and locked gazes with Bendito, his coppery eyebrows battling for pride of place with the

unruly forelock that fell across his forehead in a tumble of burnished old gold. Grinning a little, his face hidden by the woman's body so that neither Juan, Xavier, nor Pablo could see the expression it wore, he turned his gaze once more to the table and the instruments set out upon it. "– and his expertise may be sorely needed at some point during the Question," Bendito went on. "But in all good conscience I cannot ask anyone else to risk his immortal soul by remaining in this woman's presence one minute longer than is necessary.

"None of you are trained in exorcism, and so cannot help in such extremity as would demand its employment here. On the other hand, as you can see, this woman is bound in such a way that she cannot move so much as a muscle – Father Inocente and I will have no trouble putting her to the Question, never fear! While one of us takes a turn at interrogating her, the other will record her answers – a very simple procedure. I foresee no problems – other than, possibly, a need to find still another exorcist, for Father Inocente and myself, in the unlikely event that we fall to the ultimate peril." Chuckling at the idea, he continued, "So, good Brothers, please leave now – though you may remain out there in the hall, where there is much more light and fresher air, until we are done, should we stand in need of your aid."

Brother Juan, looking at the floor, sighed heavily and said, "If you say so, Father Bendito."

Brother Xavier and Brother Pablo exchanged glances, then looked back at Bendito and nodded listlessly. "We will do as you ask, Father – but it doesn't make us very happy," said Pablo.

"Well, even San Pedro himself often balked at our Lord's instructions, didn't he? – Come, now, I meant no offense, just a joke! Please, do now go out into the hall, and be sure to close the door after you. – Though if it will make you happier, we won't bolt it from this side."

"I would indeed feel much better if that were the case," agreed Brother Juan, the oldest of the three monks, with another heavy sigh. "Well, Brother Xavier, Brother Pablo, let us do as our superior asks of us. Surely, with the door unbolted, we can easily get in here again to aid them should they need us." Turning, he went to the door, the other two following him. Unhappily the three of them left the room, carefully pushing the heavy door closed behind them.

Once they had gone and the door was fully closed, Bendito looked at Inocente; the two thereupon exchanged a wickedly conspiratorial grin. "Well, my *innocent* young friend," said Bendito, his rich, deadly laughter echoing strangely the cold, rock-walled chamber, "what do you say we get to it? I am loathe to waste any more time on priestly twaddle which can be put to far better use!"

Happily agreeing, Inocente came around Dona Ynes tautly trussed form to stand next to Bendito. Quickly, the two men began to disrobe, carefully folding their garments and stacking them neatly on one end of the little table, so that they would not be stained by the vile slickness that filmed the floor like the track of some gigantic snail from Hell. Moments later, both men stood exuberantly naked in the torchlight, their powerful, lithe bodies sheened with musky sweat that gleamed redly in the light of the torches and the incandescent coals in the brazier. The older man's hard, muscular body was covered with thick mats of wiry, coal-black hair, without even one of the silver hairs which marked his temples; he looked far younger stripped than he had with his clothing on. Inocente's body, its alabaster flesh covering the muscles of an athlete, was dusted with fine, almost invisible blond hairs that caught the torchlight and the sullen glow from the brazier and radiated them back like gold-dust, so that he seemed to be enveloped in a fine golden halo covering him from neck to ankles.

Grinning even more widely than before, his long, sharp canine teeth glinting in the torchlight, Bendito picked up a long, thin knife from the table. While Dona Ynes struggled futilely, whimpering and moaning, he carefully cut away the tattered shift from her wildly straining body.

When the shift had dropped away from her body, Bendito gave a low, appreciative whistle. "Lovely!" Inocente agreed in a tense, delighted whisper.

## **Chapter 4: Unos Pocos de Cuestiones**

Lovely she was, indeed. Dona Ynes was perhaps the most beautiful woman Bendito had ever seen, even in his most feverishly blissful dreams of lust, however alien and exotic her beauty might be. Her body was white as a full Moon. Her perfect breasts were full and heavy, capped by nipples the color of rose coral. At the base of the gentle mound of her belly, hair as snowy as that on her head concealed her sex. When

Bendito reached out with one sinewy, hard hand and gently parted that hair, he saw that her labia were the color of just-formed pink rosebuds.

“You *pig*,” Dona Ynes hissed at him, her low throaty voice an infernal marriage of commingled leaden despair and icy hate. “You *bastard!* You bloody-handed *monster!*”

He laughed in delight. “Oh-*ho!* Do you hear, my friend Inocente, do you see? Our pretty little bitch, here, has real spirit! How delectable it will be to break it – as I break *her* to the halter of my will.” Grinning, he kissed her, his tongue flickering in and out of her mouth like that of a viper. As she gagged in revulsion he withdrew, still laughing, giving her lower lip a painfully sharp bite as he did.

Now going over to the table where lay the machineries of his desire and the neatly -folded piles of the clothing of the two men, he picked up his cassock and, rummaging through it, took out of one of its inside pockets a little device made of leather and metal. A gift from his old friend, the madame of a very exclusive establishment in Barcelona, the little gadget, which consisted of metal rods, a screw, and a spring, dangled from the middle of an iron-buckled leather strap or belt.

Encircling Dona Ynes’s waist with the belt so that its buckle was positioned just above the deep chalice of her navel and the metal part of the gadget attached to it hung down the cleft of her buttocks, secured to the belt by a thin silver chain. Then, reaching between her legs, he drew the device up between her ivory-white thighs and fastened it to the belt in front by another such chain, so that it nestled firmly over the cleft of her sex.

Now his deft fingers swiftly worked the little machine’s screw by means of a wing-nut so that as the screw forced apart the bars running between her thighs for the length of her sex, her labia were thereby slowly pushed apart by the little gadget’s bars, which were being expanded this way by the screw. The bars held her pubic hair tight against her labia, so that as Bendito continued to turn the screw, her crimson vulva and ruddy clitoris, so like a small, sunset-colored hollyhock bud, were more and more revealed, his view of them completely unobstructed by any pubic hair.

“Oh, you lovely bitch!” he whispered in savage delight, his sharp teeth gleaming in the torchlight. “You beautiful, beautiful cunt. Oh, will I have fun with you, you sweet little slut!” He looked up at the writhing woman with slitted eyes and a smile like Satan’s. Seeing the expression on his face, Dona Ynes began screaming wildly.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the other side of the thick, heavy door separating the chamber that held the two priests and their patient from the passageway outside, the three men who waited there in the corridor could make out little of whatever was said by those within the evil little chamber that managed to make its way through the door. They could, however, quite clearly hear Dona Yes moaning and screaming, crying, “No, please, no, stop, Mother of God, *stop!*” and similar pleas, over and over. Her wailing was loud enough to wake the dead, and came right through that enormous door and the thick rock walls around her like a hot knife through melted butter. It was clear to the three monks that the Question had been well and truly begun. Father Juan, sounding relieved, sighed and told the other two monks, “Well, Brothers, I think this will go quite well. – Dios! Perhaps that woman *is* possessed! Whatever foul tongue is she screeching in now?”

The three men winced at the incomprehensible, incoherent caterwauling that suddenly erupted in the room, coming through the heavy door almost as if it weren’t there. Finally it subsided. Pablo, compulsively clutching his rosary, his cheeks blanching, whispered, “Sweet Jesus – I do not envy Father Bendito and Father Inocente!”

Juan, older and more experienced, smiled at him and said, “It will be all right – really,” he insisted reassuringly. “They do know what they are about with her. I tell you what, let us take now take turns singing the Penitential Psalms while we wait here, for our comfort and in praise of God, to pass the time. What do you say?” Smiling, he took his breviary from the pocket of his ample sleeve. The other two men, following his lead, did the same. Opening their breviaries to the Psalms, they began to chant antiphonally, verse and response, occasionally shuddering at the screams, shrieks, and demonic wailing that burst through the door again from time to time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, inside the rock-walled chamber, Bendito and Inocente had happily set to work.

After Bendito had fixed the little machine firmly in place over Dona Ynes's sex, spreading her labia far apart so that she was completely open to his gaze and touch, he placed a warning finger over his own lips to signal to Inocente to keep his voice down as much as possible, so that the Brothers waiting in the corridor outside would have as few clues as possible as to what was really occurring here inside the room. Then he directed the younger man to stand directly behind Dona Ynes with his slowly swelling cock pressed against her ripe, creamy-white buttocks and his arms reaching around her lush torso so that he could cover her lush breasts with his hands. Inocente, a lewd, sardonic grin twisting his normally shapely lips into a demonic sneer, did as Bendito directed. Embracing her from behind, the whole length of his long, muscular torso pressed hard against her, he delicately teased her long nipples with his spiderishly long, clever fingers until they were painfully engorged with blood, as if they had been carved from rose-colored Italian marble. In the meantime, behind him, Bendito reached between his legs to fondle his scrotum and cock.

With great effort Inocente managed to restrain a groan born of blistering pleasure as the older man now knelt behind him and began to rim him with a clever, knowing tongue, darting it in and out of the younger man's anus like the hot, moist breath of a succubus or the flickering, darting lashes of Satan's barbed, sweetly venomous tail. Finally Inocente, in order to stifle a throat-shredding, volcanic scream of ecstasy that threatened to erupt catastrophically from his heaving chest, pressed his mouth hard against the ivory column of Dona Ynes's neck and bit down on it with grinding strength, hard enough to draw blood.

Bendito left of stimulating Inocente just as the younger man was ready to explode with fevered lust, rising to his feet. Then he saw the blood on Dona Ynes's neck and Inocente's lips, the younger man panting hoarsely against her shoulder. "Be careful, you idiot!" Bendito hissed at him, alarmed. "I think I can explain that one away – but only if we don't inflict any more wounds of that sort on her! You can do anything you like with her, as long as it either leaves no blood or the wound it makes at least appears to be of the sort sanctioned by the Rules of the Question!"

Inocente gave a soft, wordless groan which Bendito took to be conciliatory agreement. Whispering to the other man to remain just as he was, with his cock still pressed between the cheeks of the writhing, moaning woman's ass, doing nothing but continuing to play with her nipples for the time being until further instructed, Bendito moved back to his former position in front of Dona Ynes once more. Reaching up between her thighs, he began to tease the rosy bud that peeped out from between her labia with his fingertips. In spite of herself, belying her own cries of protest, she grew moist, her sex beginning to swell and grow hot.

Next, kneeling down before her, Bendito ran his tongue once lightly across her vulva; she moaned wildly in response. He began to play his tongue over her vulva, clitoris, and the entrance to her womb with sly, practiced, flickering touches like the fluttering of a mating bird's wings against the leaves of the tree in which it couples with its mate, the brush of the legs of a butterfly against the petals of the flower from which it feeds, the questing of the proboscis of some beautiful moth from Hell into the trumpet of a gorgeous, venomous flower blooming in the night-hung gardens of Persephone. The muscles of Dona Ynes's long, powerful thighs rippled and bunched as his tongue darted here, there over her sex, tasting and teasing; the screams that ripped upward from her throat, shattering the air, in response to his attentions alternated with panting moans that were as much those of pleasure as of horror and outrage. The musky, heady stench of sex began to fill the air.

As Bendito's tongue teased the crown of her sex with the diabolical skill of the demon Ashtaroth, the cheeks of her ass clenched convulsively on Inocente's cock, which still lay clutched tight in their swelling cleft. "Oh, bitch, bitch, bitch – oh, but I'd love to cut open your white belly and fuck your very *bowels*, you whore!" whispered Inocente against her neck. She whimpered in fear – then moaned again, Bendito's skillful teasing driving her into a frenzy of terror-shot lust.

Now Bendito began to suck at her clit with diabolical sophistication, deftly flicking it with the tip of his tongue, delicately worrying it between his white, sharp teeth. As if the two men shared a common mind, at the same time Inocente, using his sharp fingernails, pinched her nipples with cruel strength, not quite hard enough to tear her skin, but more than enough to make her scream in agony. "How do you like *that*, you bitch slut, eh?" Inocente hissed into her delicate ear. He let one hand slip down her torso, to her navel, and began teasing it delicately with his fingers as he continued to savage her nipple with his other hand, just as Bendito drew her clitoris in between his lips with a hard, twisting, sucking movement of his mouth. Instead

of screaming, she drew in her breath with a long hiss, then groaned hoarsely, a sound not one clearly of fear or pain or lust but partaking somehow of all three.

## **Chapter 5: Rosa Caliente de el Infierno**

At last Bendito once more regained his feet, lithely and evilly beautiful in the infernal red light of the torches, his skin sheened with sweat pearling on the tips of the thick, black hair that covered his throat, chest, belly, and crotch in a dense midnight mat, limning the pantherish lines of his body with beads of hellish ruby light. Walking around behind Dona Ynes and the man who stood pressed against her backside, he tapped Inocente on one broad shoulder. The gorgeous younger man stepped away from Dona Ynes, his engorged cock almost indigo with the flush of blood trapped in it, the bruise of lust's assaults. Swiftly, grasping Inocente's lean hips in his strong, brutal hands, Bendito knelt before the other man and took Inocente's swollen cock into his mouth. Slowly, careful not to bring the younger man off as he did so, Bendito generously laved Inocente's cock with his questing, practiced tongue until it was slick with a thick film of saliva. Again and again he slid it in and out of his mouth, running his tongue all along its length, back and forth, until Inocente, clutching convulsively at Bendito's hand, was ready to climax. Before he could do so, Bendito quickly pulled back and stood up again in one fluid motion.

Using gestures, Bendito now directed Inocente to take up his former position behind Dona Ynes once more, and this time slip his cock up into her anus, which was scarlet with the rush of blood engorging all the flesh nestled in her pelvis. Inocente, grunting like a rutting board as he plunged happily into her anus, brought his hands back around her body to play with her breasts once again. When Inocente began to thrust his cock back and forth, in and out of her anus, Bendito pushed his hands hard against the other man's back and buttocks, signifying that he should not move yet. Inocente groaned in frustration but complied; he temporarily reined in the searing heat of his lust by pressing his mouth to Dona Ynes's ear and whispering to her in poisonously seductive tones, "Wouldn't you like to be fucked up the ass by that iron over there on the table – after we get through heating it up in the charcoal there, bitch?" He nibbled teasingly at her ear and added, "Or maybe I could run it over your clit – how would you like some nice, hot iron *there*, you whore?"

Dona Ynes moaned. She may or may not have heard what he said. Bendito was now once more kneeling before her, teasing her sex with his tongue as he had before. Her thighs flexed and her hands and feet writhed in their bonds. She was close to dying of her terror – but the honeyed juices dripped from her sex onto Bendito's tongue like the nectar of the Gods, and her pelvis thrust forward as far as it could, given how tightly she was chained, hand and foot, her sex rising to meet the probing, flickering ministrations of his tongue with slyly cooperative timing.

Inocente thought himself close to dying in his need for release. On his knees before Dona Ynes, like some satanic suitor, Bendito was thrusting his tongue farther and farther into her vagina, rimming it expertly. His patient's wild cries were now definitely due as much to frustrated sexual need as to terror; she began to clench and unclench her buttocks in a steady rhythm, just incidentally in the process massaging Inocente's cock until he thought he would explode.

Bendito rose once more to his feet. As he stood before Dona Ynes, panting slightly, he swiftly replayed the thoughts that had run through his fevered soul all the preceding night, from Vespers through Compline to Matins and Lauds at midnight. Though he had risen several times to pace the room in an attempt to abate his delirium of lust, even going outside to stand under the star-swarmed, moonless sky in the cool night wind, the visions had made the night a continuous ferment of delicious agony, depriving him of sleep and turning his balls as blue as the Holy Mother's stainless robes by the morning, filling him with a frenzied need that kept him on the incandescent verge of murder all day long, until he had finally managed to get himself, Inocente, and the bitch alone together in this chamber, with no one else to distract them or interfere. Once again he was engulfed in tormenting visions of the slut, her beautiful white body shining like the clear waters of a mountain river under a full moon in Spring, writhing before him like a terrified succubus, just as she was now, the Adonis-like Inocente joined with him in wringing from her every last, savory drop of fiery, intoxicating pleasure they would, crushing her with his power even as he drew ecstasy like an argent thread of Satan's own torment out of her blistering, cracking mind and hemorrhaging soul and tormented body. His burning, slitted topaz eyes locked with hers for a moment, and he grinned at her.

Looking into his leopard eyes, seeing him lick his full lips and curve them into a lazy, gloating smile, she shuddered at what she saw there in his countenance, the naked, gleeful devil's-mask a doorway opening straight into Hell's own vile pit. A low, guttural moan of terror erupted from her; she was too exhausted from fear and too enervated with the lust that had begun to overcome her in spite of herself to scream, now.

For a moment more, Bendito locked gazes with her. Then he suddenly raised one powerful arm and cracked his hand across her face, not quite hard enough to split her skin, but more than sufficient to rock her head back and bring the dusky beginnings of yet another bruise to her face, which was already battered from yesterday's attentions by soldiers and guards during her capture and the first stages of her detention here at the monastery.

Bendito turned away and went to the table where the ugly instruments of the Question lay ready to hand, side-by-side on the table with still uglier, often much cruder and far older tools of the trade whose battered stocks and hilts bore writing or signs that pre-dated Old Rome, belonging to Bendito's own private collection, which only a very few, trusted friends knew he possessed. His cassock also still lay there, disordered from his rummaging through it before. Again he reached into an inner pocket of the garment, this time drawing forth two little clamps, another gift from his dear friend in Barcelona. Taking these with him, he returned to Dona Ynes. Inocente was still at her back, whispering things into her ears that now had her bone-white face going nearly transparent in her growing horror and shame.

"Take your hands away from her tits a moment, my friend – I want to add a little spice to this," Bendito whispered to the younger man. Inocente, tantalized, drew his hands slowly down Dona Ynes torso, until they came to rest on her belly. He began toying with her navel and that portion of her groin not covered with the bars of the little machine holding her sex open as he avidly watched what Bendito was doing.

In the meantime, Bendito took the two clamps, which were in the form of small iron rings with screws that enabled him to change their diameter to whatever size he desired, and fixed on each of Dona Ynes's nipples, so that these were each effectively sheathed in a thin, narrow cylinder of metal, only their rosy tips free. He slowly tightened each of them, stopping every now and then to see what the result was, until it tightly clamped the nipple it embraced, but not so tightly as to do damage to the flesh it confined in this way. As he worked the screw of each clamp, simultaneously he rubbed his thumb across the tip of her nipple. She began to moan hoarsely. When he had the clamps adjusted to his satisfaction, her nipples now hard as rocks and nearly the color of plums from the stimulation, he whispered, "All right, Innocent One, they're yours again – I suggest you draw your fingers gently across their tips, like so –" He demonstrated by once more lightly drawing his thumb across the hot tip of one of her nipples. Her hips bucked and she cried out sharply. "You see, Inocente? She will move so very deliciously when you do that – ah, you notice!" laughed Bendito. For Inocente, his cock once more rhythmically grasped and released by the muscles of her pelvis as she writhed in agonized delight under the attentions of Bendito's hands, was once again drawn nearly to a climax. Inocente thought he would faint with the pleasure and the torment of it.

Bendito, hissing at the other man to restrain himself, returned to the table, drawing forth from his cassock a vial filled with mingled honey, rose attar, and crushed pepper, made from a recipe which, like so many other delightful things, his experienced and inventive friend in Barcelona had once given him. Taking the vial over to Dona Ynes, he began to anoint the lips of her sex, her vulva, her clit, and the entrance to her womb with its contents, using careful, delicate touches that made a cruelly deft counterpoint to the fiery, stinging fury that swept across her sex, radiating from thence outward to the palms of her hands, the soles of her feet, the core of her breasts and the tips of her nipples (these last already in torment from the clamps that kept them engorged with blood, as it was).

For a few moments that seemed eternities to her disintegrating mind, her sex felt as if Inocente had finally made good his threats and branded her there with an incandescent iron. Her screams clawed the air, penetrating the room's granite walls and thick door so that even the devout men standing outside in the corridor quailed with instinctive pity before they could suppress their rebellious sympathies and, true men of Christ that they were, return to contemplation of the holy work in which they were assisting.

The burning in Dona Ynes's sex finally faded to a steady, suggestive warmth, a fiercely stimulating tingling that had her panting now with true sexual heat. Even so, in spite of her growing lust the harsh, panting cries she uttered in her frenzy sounded to those waiting outside the door like the ejaculations which other patients of the Inquisition made as the Questions was applied in its various forms, not the growling cries of a woman in the throes of full sexual arousal.

Inocente was still working on her nipples, alternately delicately brushing his fingertips across their tips and cruelly pinching her scarlet aureolae with his ivory-hard, flint-sharp fingernails. As he did so, fighting to keep himself from thrusting his rock-hard cock any deeper into her and thereby touching off the climax for which his agonized balls were begging, in the silky intonations which the Serpent must have used on Mother Eve in Paradise he hissed into the pink shell of her ear that was so like the lovely, dawn-tipped ivory shell of some exotic sea-creature, “And after I grind that pretty clit of yours off with the red-hot pliers, my dear little slut, I think I will give you the pleasure of being well and truly reamed . . . with the hot irons. What do you think of *that*, eh? And if *that* isn’t to your . . . *patrician* tastes, my darling little bitch, perhaps we could try your nipples or possibly your cunt in the thumbscrews. Would you like that, you lovely whore?” For a moment he slipped his hands down from his ribs to grind his thumbs deep into her armpits, sending exquisite waves of agony cascading outward to mingle with her almost unbearable sexual need and the pleasure rippling upward from her sex as Bendito worked his tongue around it. The marriage of pleasure and pain which the two together brought about in her suffused her entire being with a deliciously lewd aching, as the mouth of Hell must feel as it gapes open hungrily for the souls of sinners. She thereupon uttered a burst of low, ambiguous whimpers that could as easily have been pleas for more as for surcease. Then Inocente once more raised his hands to torment her breasts, and her whimpers changed to frankly sensual moans.

Bendito, having put aside the vial of peppered, scented honey in order to once more tease her sex with his tongue and fingers, left off from his sly tasting of her nectar, which flowed down from her sex onto her thighs in fragrant trickles, and stood up. Taking the low stool which all this time had stood beneath the table, he placed it just before her and stepped up on it. The tip of his monstrously engorged cock, its trapped burden of blood giving it a nearly inky, purplish-blue coloring, now reached to her navel as it strained upward from his crotch. With one quick thrust, he slid it up into her hot slick warmth all the way to the mouth of her womb and a little way into it. She cried out sharply in pain; Inocente groaned in lascivious counterpoint.

The pressure applied by Bendito’s cock to the other side of the wall of her rectum excited the younger priest to a frenzy. Lust commingled with mindless rage, the pain of his swollen balls became inextricably intermixed with the delight in the power which he and the older man held over the lovely little bitch in a fulminating blend that exploded somewhere in the middle of his head in a white starburst of utter ecstasy that momentarily obliterated what was left of his rational, daylight mind. He raged with sudden need to claw her eyes from her head and chew on them before shoving them down her gagging throat, to fuck her until she hemorrhaged, to open up her throat with a dagger and shove his cock into the wound and fill her with his boiling seed even as she died, strap a dildo on her and have Bendito force her to fuck *him*, to suck Bendito’s cock as Bendito had done his, to – His fingers dug into her breasts so hard that it was only by a miracle that her tender skin did not burst from the pressure, and with the tearing howl of a blood-maddened hyena he began thrusting in and out of her ass, grunting hoarsely, his hips slamming into her with bruising force, as he did so. Her ring clamped down on his cock like the archangel Michael stroking Adam off in Paradise, like Eve’s cunt must have closed over the Serpent’s head, like Satan’s mouth on Jesus’s cock . . .

Bendito, for his part, the other side of Dona Ynes, bucked and rocked toward his own climax, hissing, “Oh, you cunt, you beautiful little whore, God damn you, damn you to Hell, that’s it, bitch, keep doing that, oh, you little honey, God, it would feel like this to fuck Our Lady, oh, you angel, you slut, do that, *yes* –”

## **Chapter 6: El Juicio de Dios**

The first sign that any of the three men waiting in the corridor outside the chamber’s door had that something had gone badly wrong with things inside the chamber was the world-shattering scream which blasted out through the door as if it weren’t even there, far louder than any that had preceded it. This time, however, instead of the tones of the screams of a terrified, tormented woman, it carried those of two male voices *in extremis*, blended in mutual horror and agony. This bellowing scream was instantly followed by horrible, knowing laughter – it must have been what Lilith sounded like after successfully murdering an infant saint-to-be or seducing an Apostle. For the few moments that that awful laugh endured, it seemed to fill all the world with the mocking horror of its ringing triumph. Then it ceased, fading to nothing almost at once, leaving behind a vast void filled with ominous possibilities.



Shouting orders to his two companions and yelling for the guards, Brother Juan threw himself at the huge iron-sheeted door and struggled to pull it open. It took the combined efforts of himself, both the other monks, and four guardsmen to do the job, as if an impossible vacuum behind it had sucked it tightly shut.

When they finally got the stubbornly resistant door open, what confronted them and the others who came running to see what the commotion was all about was so far beyond all their expectations and experience that at first they could not believe the evidence of their own eyes. When their staggering minds finally caught up with their eyes, they realized that the pathetic, mangled heaps before them on the slimy stone floor of the room were the naked, unmoving bodies of Bendito and Inocente, their wide-open, staring eyes bulging forth from their sockets as if they were already looking upon the incandescent halls of Hell, their faces black with apoplexy and twisted into masks of horror that completely obliterated Bendito's masculine good looks and Inocente's almost archangelic beauty. They lay in a still-spreading scarlet pool of blood mixed with feces and urine catastrophically voided from their bowels and bladders, indisputably very, very dead. Scattered on the floor about them were the dying coals from the brazier and the shattered remains of the instruments that had been arrayed on the table, the stool that had been placed beneath it now a small scatter of kindling nearby. The black and white habits which the two men had worn were now just a heap of offal-soaked rags which, along with the remains of their shattered pectoral crosses and the beads of their sundered rosaries lay scattered in ruins about their bodies.

That, though, wasn't the worst of it. It wasn't even the sickening wreckage of the manhood of the two dead priests, the blasted remains of which looked as if they had first been chewed by a playful tiger, then dipped into some terrible burning acid, that caused Brother Pablo to collapse in a babbling heap on the noisome floor, Brother Xavier and several of the guards to run screaming up the corridors in their terror while several other guardsmen hung back as if paralyzed with fear, moaning and unthinkingly crossing themselves again and again, and old Brother Juan to fall on his knees in frantic prayer.

No, the true, soul-blasting horror of the scene was that *nowhere in the room, which had no other doors, not even a hole in the ceiling or a window in the walls or a trap in the floor of any kind, was Dona Ynes to be found.* The manacles by which she had been secured to the beam above her head and the floor hung slack or lay sprawled across the floor – but they were still securely fastened, just as they had been when Juan himself, at Father Bendito's insistence, had turned the keys to lock them fast about her wrists and ankles, and there was no way she could have slipped either her hands or her feet of them as they were. In fact, other than the slashed remains of her shift on the floor, there was no sign that she had ever occupied that room. She could not have left through the door, either, or the three priests would have seen her, which they most assuredly had not. It was as if she had vanished into the air like steam from a kettle heating over a camp-fire into the wide Summer sky.

They never saw her again, nor any trace of her. Eventually representatives of the Church, accompanied by the Archbishop's soldiers, went to seize her property; but where her lovely villa had nestled on its vast estates, its surrounding fields filled with a wealth of cattle, sheep, thriving orchards and fields lush with cash and food crops, there were now only blackened, tumbled ruins, at least centuries old, on a barren, lifeless stretch of wastelands populated only with the blasted, parched corpses of trees long dead of thirst, and a few bleached skulls and rib-bones of beasts that looked to have died in the remote past of some horrible withering disease. Nothing ever grew there again, and no one ever wanted to claim it, then and forever after.

The village that had been its neighbor for so many years, in such peace, shared prosperity, and mutual happiness, they found, was deserted, its houses become derelict and weed-grown. The people had all fled, taking most of their possessions with them. Here and there they found a child's toy, a broken dish, the carcass of a dog lying in the street or in one of the empty houses, under a roof gone to rack and ruin. The land adjoining the village, which the villagers had farmed so productively and lovingly for so many generations, was now a blighted moonscape like that surrounding the villa across the river. Its wealth of olive orchards, lush vineyards, and fertile croplands had been turned to a scorched wasteland whose pitifully few tumbles of blackened, blasted vines, occasional lone, skeletal trees, with here and there a heap of rotting chaff made cruelly ironic comment upon its former glory. Even the birds seemed to have fled the area; they did not hear so much as the caw of a crow or the low hooting of an owl. A thin, wintry wind, its faint keening like the howls of damned souls heard from afar, kicked up great clouds of dust in the empty streets and whirled pieces of trash about, flinging them into the faces of the monks, priests, and soldiers who had come to seize its living wealth and instead had found it a dry, desiccated, naked corpse without

even coins for the journey across the Styx left to it. In that dead village, the only other sound was the creaking of the rope by which Jorge, whose report to Father Luis had led to Dona Ynes's arrest and all the destruction in the first place, hung by his neck, dangling from a dead, leafless tree standing behind one of the ruined houses. The thirteen pieces of silver which he had received from the Dominicans as the first installment on his reward for bringing Dona Ynes to the attention of the Church lay scattered on the ground beneath his feet. Gouged all the way through the tattered remnants of flesh still covering his brow and into the bone beneath with a hard-driven, wide-bladed knife was the accusation: "Judas." The knife which had presumably been used to do the job lay among the scattered coins at his feet, its blade streaked heavily with rust-brown, long dried blood.

Brother Xavier, who had come with the detail that had been ordered to seize the woman's estates, shook his head at all this and said to Brother Jose, a much younger man who had been sent out with him to act as his assistant, "I wish none of us had ever heard of that infernal woman! Look at this – this *ruin*! Good old Brother Juan dead of a heart-attack two months ago from the strain of it all, Brother Pablo raving in delirium even now, back there at the monastery hospital, from the shock, Fathers Bendito and – well, never mind. I just wish Our Lord had spared us the burden of this – this *insanity*. God, if I could only be reassigned, somewhere else, *anywhere* else, even *England*, Christ help me, where I'd never again be reminded of any part of this diabolical business!"

Brother Jose nodded respectfully but remained silent, not sure what to say. All the way back to Sevilla, Brother Xavier brooded over it, remembering how they had buried Bendito and Inocente so quickly, with as little fuss or publicity over the matter as possible. The families of the two priests had been notified only that they had "died in Our Lord's good service," nothing else. There was a service, masses were said – and that was it. The details of their horrible deaths hadn't gone beyond the monastery where it had all happened. The guardsmen who had witnessed the ugly, impossible scene in the little room were told an official version of what had happened, with the implicit promise that if they did not accept what the Church told them was the truth, and said anything, anything whatsoever, to anyone at all, even *suggesting* that the facts of the case were other than what the Church decreed they were, they would not only be excommunicated but also themselves put to the Question as heretics, given over to be burnt, any property held by them and their families seized by the Church, their families themselves sold into slavery. A bad business. A very bad business, indeed.

But as vivid as the horror of it had been a few months ago, the memory of it was fading, crowded out by the news that had all Spain convulsed in a ferment of excitement: His Majesty had decided to try once more to invade that insolent, God-hating, devil-inhabited island-kingdom, England, and claim it for his own in the name of his dead wife, Queen Mary (though the ungodly observed snidely that the *real* reason had far more to do with empty coffers and lust for power than it ever had with moral right or service to God). So to that end lumberers, hired by the Crown's shipwrights, now filled the countryside throughout Spain, cutting down all but the reediest of saplings and carting their harvest away to the great shipyards of Lisboa, Corunna, Oporto, Vigo, and Santander for the building of the men-of-war that would make up the vast armada which His Majesty was planning to use to invade England.

Now that the sheltering, shading trees had been stripped from her hills and valleys, wind, weather, and the relentless, beating, burning heat of the Sun were quickly and brutally stripping away all of Spain's fertile topsoil. Spain was beginning to seem as if she were just a vast extension of those blasted, dead lands which Brother Xavier and his escort had gone so futilely to seize. She was fast going to rack and ruin as her life-blood – the people and their constant cherishing of her once-fertile, lush, and populous lands – streamed away from her to the colonies in the Americas, where there was still some hope and a man had a chance to keep his family fed, housed, and clothed without killing himself, trying to win an unwinnable war against the Elements (not to mention all the foreign armies that had now invaded Spain).

At night, Brother Xavier found that he could no longer bear to remain outside, under the glory of the stars and beauty of God's cosmos. If the moon was full or nearly so, it seemed to look like Jorge's skull, peeking so obscenely through the gaping rents in the tattered remnants of its former garment of flesh, and a ghostly stench of carrion seemed to fill all the world. When the moon was waning, it looked too much like some monstrous scythe like that carried by the Angel of Death for his comfort. Oddly, when it was waxing, it made him think of Gabriel's Trumpet, a thought which filled him with dread, for no fathomable reason. And when it was new, or close to it, he could somehow see it during the day, as a black hole in the sky near the Sun, or even *obscuring* the Sun like some obscene, out-of-season eclipse, a mocking reversal of its

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shining white, bony splendor against the ebon night sky during the time of the full moon. Was he falling under the spell of a malaise similar to that which had made of poor Brother Pablo a raving lunatic, almost certainly permanently so, and hopelessly deranged? Or had some fiends out of the Pit decided to send him such imaginings by way of softening him up for a full-scale assault on his soul of some kind.

These horrible lunar visions weren't the worst of it, however. It was the mocking laughter that seemed to well out of the very soil of the deserted hills and farmlands around Sevilla and throughout the rest of Spain once the night had fallen that was coming closer and closer to sending him tottering over the edge of the abyss into total madness and the self-damnation of suicide, just to escape its terrible taunting music. Except that he had never once heard her laugh, he would have sworn it came from the strange woman whose disappearance under the Question had been associated with Bendito and Inocente's ghastly deaths. It didn't help, either, when he overheard people whispering that the mad laughter that erupted night after night out of the countryside was that of Hekate, Queen of the Witches, a demoness far older and more powerful than Lilith had ever dreamed of being, according to peasant folk-tales, gloating over the troubles of the Christian world, of which there were certainly plenty now!

Even within the safety of his cell, kneeling in his devotions before Christ on His Cross or the Image of His Holy Mother Mary, Xavier couldn't escape the laughter; at such times, the tingling contractions of his scrotum as the horror of it oozed lazily across his shuddering brain like a trickle of hot demon-piss sluicing down the walls of his soul became nearly unbearable. What cut him to the marrow of his soul was this: When, in the nights, he heard that howling, triumphant laughter, he did not, as he should have, connect it at once in his mind with the face of an avenging Harpy or the monstrous, bloated visage of Lilith, Queen of Hell, battering upon men's lusts and agonies. Instead, he saw the serene, sweet face of Mary, the lovely, gentle Mother of Christ, kneeling radiantly in that shower of golden light by which the Holy Spirit must have entered into her to conceive Our Lord. It was then that he would take out the little scourge, the one with the thongs studded with sharp iron thorns, and begin all over again to shred the flesh of his back and shoulders and loins, which, in just these few short months, had become completely covered with ugly ulcers and heavy, twisting scar-tissue all the nauseating colors of Satan's own dreams from his use of the scourge during his endless nightly war with whatever imp of Hell so relentlessly, irresistibly forced that maddening, blasphemous, yet overwhelmingly compelling vision before the eyes of his soul.

## 8. A Voice at the Edge of Dream

(Previously published in *Seditious Delicious*, Autumn 1985)

*And a voice spoke to me from the heart of a mushroom cloud*

I will make of you  
A white shadow on a black wall –  
Come, look deep into  
The furnace of my soul,  
And lose all care.  
I will make of you  
Cracked green glass in a wilderness  
And a gray wail expanding in the night.  
You deny that I exist,  
Yet I am your very bones –  
And you wonder why  
You dream of skulls  
And waken full of dread?  
I will make of you  
A white shadow on a black wall –  
And a black illumination  
Of exposed white guilt.  
I am Trinity  
And a child's white shadow  
On a scorched black wall  
And the cries you will not hear  
In the night.  
I will make of you  
A blinded thing  
Who can no longer will  
Not to see:  
I am Hiroshima  
And your fleeing soul –  
And all that lies ahead of you is me,  
And all that lies behind you is me,  
And all that lies within you is me,  
And if you want it otherwise  
You must acknowledge me.  
I am the Phoenix –  
And thou art me.  
You must accept my many deaths –  
Or perish utterly.

## 9. The Sick Little Caterpillar: A Parable

[Another version of this story was published in a 1984 issue of David Nestle's *Popular Reality*, and one in a 1983 issue of *Rubidium Crystal* fanzine]

Once upon a time, there was a very neurotic young caterpillar named Alexander, called "Alec" by everyone who knew him. Immature and divorced from the realities of the world, he lived in a fantasy world much of the time. As the lovely, warm days of Summer went by, and June and July were succeeded by August and September, instead of going industriously to work and then relaxing at tennis or golf the way that all his well-adjusted friends and relatives did, Alec began to spend most of his time in bed, dreaming his life away. After a couple of months of this, more and more often he was heard to declare he wished that he had never left the womb.

As time went by, and Summer passed into the first days of Autumn, Alec became schizzier and schizzier. When he wasn't sleeping – which he was, most of the time – he began to create weird works of "art," what he referred to as his "Womb-Cycle." Called "Womb I," "Womb II," and so on, they represented his ever-growing preoccupation with what he called "The Alchemical Womb," in which, he said, one could "return to the Source" and become "transmuted" into a "Magickal Child," the "Inheritor of the Future." He churned out these nasty, lumpishly amorphous productions, done up in eye-blasting psychedelic colors like something turned out during recreational therapy by the whackos in the back wards of the local state hospital, in ever-increasing numbers, each one uglier and stranger than the last. And he began to insist that his friends and family call him "Aleister," scorning his rightful name in favor of something he'd dreamed up as part of his rapidly evolving fantasies, in which he was a wise and powerful wizard, Magickally transported from world to world by the grace of beautiful wings sprouting from his back, where he paid court to lovely princesses, drank nectar from fantastic, rainbow-colored chalices, and sired a thousand thousand children, all across the world. It was very sad. No one was sure what to do about it, but everyone agreed that if it didn't stop soon, Alec was surely headed for disaster.

They weren't wrong. By the end of September, he had finally produced his masterpiece: "Womb 40," a huge, horrible lumpen thing that looked for all the world like some Brobdingnagian, purple-chartreuse-and-yellow plastic tear dripped from the eyes of a sequoia-sized Tom O' Bedlam, hollowed out in the middle with a space just large enough to hold one good-sized caterpillar . . . say, one about Alec's size.

Sure enough, bare moments after finishing "Womb 40," Alec, yelling that he was now going to "return to the Womb of the World to be reborn in Light," dove head-first into his latest creation and quickly rammed a plug into place behind him, covering the hole and concealing himself from those outside. A violent stench of Superglue leaked outward from the edges of the plug, filling his studio, followed by the sound of hammering from within the thing. Then, the odor of glue dissipating rapidly, silence fell. Only a note, pasted to the outside of his studio door, which was bolted shut from the inside, was left to let others know what had happened to him.

Now, all this time, Alec's poor friends and relatives, industrious, sober, well-adjusted citizens who paid their taxes, worked hard at their jobs, voted regularly, and otherwise upheld their responsibilities in life, had thought that Alec was little more than a lazy bum. But when, about an hour after Alec had finally made his resoundingly artistic exit from reality, his friend Somerset, coming by the studio to see how Alec was doing, found Alec's note, and frantically began to call up everyone to tell them what Alec had done, they realized that, rather than being just a ne'er-do-well shirker, Alec was actually a very sick caterpillar, his outrageous behavior really a clear cry for help. So they all raced down to Alec's studio as fast as they could, many of them even leaving work to do so. There, they quickly broke down the studio door and began prying open "Womb 40," using the crowbars chisels, and other tools handily spread out across the big trestle-tables along the studio's walls, which Alec had been using as work-benches.

They had to admit that while Alec may have missed his calling when it came to art, he was a sheer genius at engineering. Though fear for Alec's safety – after all, how much air could there be in there for him to breathe? – leant them enormous strength, it took what seemed to be hours before they were able to open up a large enough hole in the side of "Womb 40" to pull Alec out. Exhausted, but overjoyed to find him still

alive, they were stunned and horrified to find that Alec, though breathing slow, shallow, regular breaths, was as unmoving as a doll. Eyes closed, he lay in a fetal curl, his limbs displaying the waxy immobility characteristic of profound catatonia, moving only when re-arranged by others' hands, remaining in whatever position they put them in.

Appalled, his friends and family immediately called an ambulance. They followed the wildly wailing ambulance all the way to City Hospital in a caravan moving at dangerously high speeds, careless of road conditions and cops alike, concerned only for Alec. Somehow avoiding both crashes and the Highway Patrol, the long caravan roared into the hospital parking-lot just yards behind the ambulance carrying Alec, which had stopped right next to the doors to the hospital's emergency room.

Anxiously they stood by while the paramedics gently, carefully lifted Alec, now wide-awake and raving, tightly strapped into supine near-immobility on his stretcher and covered from toes to chin with a heavy red blanket, out of the ambulance and carried him through the doors of the emergency room. As Alec babbled on and on about flying away on Magickal wings and finding the woman of his dreams, the emergency-room attendants, shaking their heads sadly, injected him with a massive dose of Thorazine and watched over him until, his eyes suddenly rolling back in his head and glazing over, Alec passed out. "Vee are going to have to keep him here for a few weeks," Dr. Joy, the doctor on duty that night in the emergency room, solemnly told the crowd of anxious friends and relatives who had come in with Alec. "He iz vun sehr krank caterpillar. Chust listen to him – delusions of vlying. Vimmen mit regn-boygnenden vings. Ach – boor lad! It's zecks, you know. Zecksshual rebression – it's gone to his kop. Sehr umetik – zuch a patern . . ." he said, tsk-ing sadly.

Randi, one of Alec's brother's, tears in his eyes, told Dr. Joy, "Do what has to be done, Doc – I want my brother to have the best. – Oh, God, why couldn't I see – why wasn't I able to tell he was sick? I feel so guilty! Please, Doc – I'll do anything to have Alec well again!"

Stephen Jay and Martin, Alec's other brothers, agreed. "Please, Doctor Joy," said Martin, "as long as Alec gets well again, nothing else counts! Don't spare anything to help him!" He looked around at all the others, who quickly agreed, muttering, nodding, adding their own comments.

"Okay – vee put him on the Haldol, he'll be right as rain in no time, don't worry, don't worry . . ." Dr. Joy soothed them. "Chust let's get him into his own room, start him on a Haldol brotocol, he'll be a new man bevore you know it!"

Everyone rushed to assure the doctor that he should begin whatever treatments were most likely to help as soon as possible. So the doctor rang for the doctor on duty in the psyche ward upstairs, who dispatched orderlies to bring Alec up to his floor and put him in an empty room, where they could begin treatment at once. Kind Dr. Joy then sent everyone home again – after all, there wasn't anything they could do here, beyond what they had done already, other than lose sleep and get in the doctors' and one another's way. So his family and friends, with anxious backward looks, quietly filed out and made their way home, to wait for word about Alec.

That word wasn't as long in coming as they had feared. Fortunately, Alec responded quickly and well to the standard treatments. After a couple of weeks on alternating courses of Haldol, Stellazine and Thorazine, Alec had calmed down considerably. Within a few more weeks, finally well once more (if somewhat sluggish, and now wholly and a little unsettlingly devoid of that enormous, rainbow-banded libido that had so plagued him with those sick fantasies of flying and oversexed alien women), he was released from the hospital, at last well-adjusted and ready to take his rightful place in society as a responsible citizen and member of the community.

Upon his release from the hospital, he was appalled to learn that at the time of his own catastrophic breakdown, many other young caterpillars, all about his age, had also exhibited exactly the same syndrome: delusions of flying, satyriacal obsessions with beautiful, alien, rainbow-winged females, Magickal thinking, the whole nine yards. Indeed, just as he himself had been, the majority of them had had to be routed out of one or another variety of horrible, self-created nest (eerily, like him, not a few of them had even referred to their nasty creations as "wombs", and raved of being "transmuted into Magickal children"!)

But, as in his own case, all of them had been successfully treated and returned, well and productive once more, to society – that is, except for a few who, rather than trying to seal themselves into one sort or another of nest indoors, had managed to escape into the wood before they could be taken, and disappeared. They were few and far between, though; and the unique epidemic had finally been stamped out, to everyone's overwhelming relief and joy.

But now society had two new worries.

Here and there, reports were coming in of strange flying beasts flitting about, high above the city. So far, there hadn't been many of these – but almost certainly they had to potential threats, possibly the heralds of some terrible invasion of the things to come, one that could wreak havoc, even destroy civilization. Some of these had been shot down, and the rest, seeing what happened to their comrades, had fled. So maybe they weren't such a threat, after all.

But the other threat remained, and was potentially much worse in import: unlike previous years, almost no new caterpillars were coming in from the woods as Spring spread across the land. This was bad news. The caterpillar population now had a very narrow age-base, and was rapidly declining in numbers. Without a constant supply of young new caterpillars coming in each year to replace the older ones who had either died or, even now, though in a diminishing number of cases, suddenly gone insane and fled to the woods to make that strange, obsessive pilgrimage in search of “the Womb of the World,” there were fewer and fewer workers to carry out all the tasks necessary to the healthy functioning of a complex, progressive society. It might not be long before their numbers fell below the critical limit, and civilization began to fall apart at the seams for sheer lack of the material necessary to hold it together – ending not with the bang of an alien invasion, but rather with the whimper of extinction.

Already the cranks were beginning to preach that these growing problems were the result of the increasing urbanization of life. There were even a number of religious nuts – unfortunately, some of them with large, dangerously vocal followings among the citizenry – who claimed that the abandonment of the older, more primitive and pagan ways of life of their forebears, now of course shown to be erroneous and outmoded by science and the wonderful life which the wonderful modern high-energy technology and the progressive culture necessary to sustain it had brought to all, was responsible for these problems.

Some, mostly middle-aged or even elderly citizens, even went so far as to dress up in long linen robes and carry signs saying “THE END IS AT HAND – ARE YOU PREPARED TO MEET GODDESS?” and similar nonsense, picketing banks, shops, and places of entertainment all over the business district. By and large, insofar as it was possible, these were treated in much the same way as the delusional younger caterpillars had been: detained for treatment in the form of integrated protocols of Haldol, Mellaril, Stellazine, and other strong, effective psychotropic agents in the hospital, then released for continued out-patient treatment in clinics. But this wasn't nearly as successful as it had been in the case of the younger ones. Unfortunately, many of these older caterpillars developed weird, even potentially life-threatening side-effects as a result of this form of treatment, and had to be taken off the drugs in order to save their health or even their lives. The CCLU was threatening to bring a class-action suit on behalf of these religiously manic oldsters, and the NAACC was already preparing go before the public with claims that the drugs used in the treatments were often used discriminately and illegally, to control or suppress dissent among members of minority groups, rather than to aid in the restoration and maintenance of mental health, as the Caterpillar Medical Association and the Caterpillar Psychiatric Association claimed. Led by Dr. Joy, who had become a sort of medical hero for his work in trying to stem the tides of epidemic insanity which periodically rolled over civilization, threatening everything built up for so long, by so many, which such care, the CMA and CPA worked day and night to defend their actions and efforts before the public – but it was becoming a losing battle. No matter what they tried, it all seemed to go for naught – and meanwhile, the situation, and with it, civilization, continued to deteriorate.

*Well, the now well-adjusted caterpillar, older but wiser, thought as he thoughtfully read the latest issue of Barron's over his morning coffee at his club one Saturday, at least we really whipped the problem of mass psychosis! Only the senile and the unreconstructed pagan religious nuts are getting sucked into those ghastly delusions, any more . . .*

But then he blushed as he recalled his own delusions of returning to the womb, of flying, of those gorgeous, oversexed women from another dimension . . .

*Thank God Dr. Joy got to me in time! he thought. Otherwise, it might be me out there, holding up those signs and ranting with the other nuts . . .*

## **10. Voice-Therapy: Knots**

“Do you hear voices?”

“I hear *a* voice.”

“And what does the voice say?” (*softly*)

“It says, ‘You’re *sick*.’”

“You *are* sick. *There is no voice.*”



## 11. The Ostringer

The five of us were sharing a table and a pitcher at Petrocelli's Pizza one rainy Saturday autumn night after the jocks had thinned out somewhat. Our eclectic little group included my erstwhile college classmate and sometimes good buddy Charles Old; my cousin and roommate, Jodi Weiss; my cousin on the other side, who also lived about three streets down from us, John van Morgenstern the Nine-Hundred and Thirtieth or so (to hear him tell it – among others, one of his major hobbies included creative genealogy); me; and Tom Warner, a deputy sheriff.

Tom, who lived about an hour's bicycle-ride away on the outskirts of the city of Santa Real itself, was attached to the Foot Patrol here in Monte Vista, the little town next to the University of California at Santa Real, where the rest of us five.

"I guess it's my turn to spring for a pizza," Tom offered. With perks, Tom makes more than any two of the rest of us together, so we didn't object. However, since Tom also makes – perks and all – rather less than a comfortable living, he scowled at our collective lack of protest – but, being a good sport, he shrugged good-naturedly and ordered a Large pizza for us all, anyway.

When he finally returned from the counter with the pizza, Jodi said to him, "Tom, all the rest of us have told a story or two about ourselves. Now it's your turn. What's the most interesting thing you've ever run into?"

Tom set the pizza down, sat down on the bench next to Charles and took a wedge of pizza for himself. While we likewise helped ourselves to the pizza, he considered awhile as he thoughtfully masticated his own piece of pizza. Finally, swallowing a mouthful of crust, he said, "Well, I don't know ... I've seen some weird cases, all right, but they're all Department business and I really shouldn't talk about them. Hmm . . ." "Okay," he said, finally deciding, "I'll tell you one – did you ever hear about the Eagle-Girl of Valle Grosse?"

We all looked blank – except for Charles, our Resident Skeptick, who was busily tucking in his psychic bib in contented anticipation of a long, pleasant feed off Tom's ego.

Tom went on: "It happened a couple of years ago, when the rains were so bad – remember? It's so weird that no one would really believe it happened, except for those of us who were directly involved in it, so we closed the file with 'Death by Misadventure,' though we *really* meant 'Death by Act of God' which would have been a lot closer to the mark ..."

"Oh, dear – did the Great Thunderbird off a wino?" Charles asked unctuously.

"Well, why don't you listen for yourself and then judge, Charles ol' bean?"

"It started," Tom said, while Charles scowled at Tom's lack of appreciation of his scintillant wit, "with an investigation of possible child-abuse in one of those big, ritzy homes in Valle Grosso. A psychiatrist's daughter, who went to Don Alejandro Camarillo Junior High School in Valle Grosse, began coming to school more and more frightened and withdrawn every day from the first day of seventh grade on. She'd had an outstanding academic record up through sixth grade, in spite of great shyness and a tendency to be somewhat withdrawn, but her marks suddenly dropped to straight F's by November of her first semester in seventh grade. So her teachers felt that something had to be very wrong at home, even though the girl was never bruised or otherwise physically injured.

"So the school authorities called Child Welfare, but rather timidly, since there was no physical evidence of abuse. They asked that agency to investigate the situation and find out just what was really going on. So Child Welfare sent out a team – which never got inside the house. The doctor – the girl's father – threatened to have all the investigators run in far harassment and violation of his constitutional rights, blah-blah-etcetera, and sue the school in the bargain. Well, since there was no evidence of physical abuse, it would have been impossible to get a warrant, as it was. And since one of the doctor's close friends – who also just happened to be his own personal attorney – was the head of the local chapter of the ACLU at that time, nobody wanted to risk pushing it any farther.

"But then the school psychologist called Child Welfare. She told them that while the girl was obviously intermittently, uh, delusional, she'd told her (that is, the school shrink) that her father had killed her pets and had made her watch while he did it – a punishment for what he called 'silliness'... which was the psychosis or whatever which the school psychologist diagnosed the girl as having.

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“The school shrink felt that the girl was under tremendous strain at home, and was undergoing a breakdown, and that her father was punishing her for it by killing her pets.”

“‘Pets?’” asked Jodi.

“Hawks. And owls. And an eagle.”

We all stared at him. “She was an *ostringer*?” John asked in delight – all his life, he had loved anything and everything having to do with birds. He himself had had a pair of ravens, and later, a bluejay, and one of his life’s fondest dreams was to have a mews full of hawks and gear for training and flying them.

Tom grinned. “Yeah. The school psychologist wasn’t sure whether to believe it or not, at first – she thought it might be one of the girl’s delusions or hallucinations or whatever. But just in case, she reported it to Child Welfare.

“Well, when Child Welfare checked it out, they found out that the family really did keep such birds. In fact, as they learned, the girl had competed with some of those birds and had won some hefty awards for it. – The family’s neighbors, though, weren’t at all fond of the birds. Seems the eagle had gotten loose a time or two, terrorizing some small children in the area, leaving big smelly piles of, er, feces on roofs and lawns, and ripping off neighborhood livestock, like, somebody’s Pekinese, somebody else’s budgies right out of the cage next to an open window, like that. And the shrink’s back yard, where they were kept – well, you sure wouldn’t need a road-map to find it!”

“All that birdshit?” asked Charles.

“Right!” John laughed. “Raptors such as eagles are carnivores, you know. Their feces are full of ammonia – and unlike cats, they don’t bury it. Fehhh!” Grinning, he made a face, holding his nose for emphasis.

“Ewww – Peke bones all over the yard!” I muttered.

“So *that’s* what happened to Professor Braintree’s poodle?” Jodi mused.

“Yeah, well, from what you’ve told me about that mutt, the neighbors wouldn’t given a hoot in hell about it – shit, they’d have given the bird a Good Housekeeping Award or something for ridding the neighborhood of an aggravated disaster!” I reminded her.

“Well, go *on* – what *happened*?” John urged Tom.

“Well, so Child Welfare found out that the birds no longer were in evidence, either in the air or on the shrink’s property or anywhere else, as far as anyone knew. So the school authorities called the SPCA, who called us. -- We could have called in the Environmental Protection Agency, too, because some of the neighbors swore on a stack of bibles they were keeping Goddamn’ *condors* in there! But that was just a bit *too* wild – bringing in the Feds on mere hearsay would have been suicidal, career-wise. So ol’ Boss John – my boss – said Screw It.

“But we did go in with a search-warrant and an SPCA investigation team, and we found that the birds were indeed missing – and that, just coincidentally, ground for a small garden had just been prepared a couple of days before. With great big lumps in it.

“Over the shrink’s yells, shrieks of rage, curses and threats, we dug it all up again and found some rather suspicious birdy remains. “His daughter, who stood by silently, watching us dig up the ‘garden,’ began to cry when she saw the bodies of the birds that we unearthed that night. Her father yelled at her to get the hell into the house.

“Oh, no,” the lieutenant said, “she may be a material witness. Dear, would you come down to the station with us and tell us how those birds got there?”

“She started to say something – and then was riveted to the spot, dumb as a post, by a snake-cold ‘I’ll kill you if you do’ glare from her old man. She shook her head ‘No’ without looking at any of us, then, tears running down her cheeks in rivers, and walked slowly to the house.

“– And sunuvabitch if it didn’t turn out that the warrant hadn’t been properly made out, so the cruelty-to-animals charge was thrown out and we and the SPCA ended up being sued by the shrink for harassment and false arrest – and he collected, too, damn him.”

“So what about the girl’s – you know, her psychosis, anyway?” asked Charles. “You still haven’t said much about it.”

The look Tom turned on him was a study in equal measures of irritation, self-control, and amusement. “Gee, I guess I didn’t, did I, now, Charlie? Tell you what, without too much trouble, *you* could have been in that backyard, yourself ... You have the *strangest* resemblance to some of those little old ladies who love to gloat over everybody else’s troubles in the *National Enquirer*, you know?”

“Oh, never mind him,” I said, before Charles could explode. “Please go on with your story!”

Tom looked at me and grinned. “Well, for *you*, beautiful, I will.

“Okay,” he continued, “the school psychologist told us that the girl was proclaiming that she was a ‘bird priestess,’ a reincarnated Native American medicine-woman who had, in her last life, been the human, uh, avatar? – yeah, avatar of the Spirit of All Eagles. She claimed she was doing Bird Magic to take her to the Kingdom of the Eagles to get help to destroy the Bark Priest of Poisons, her father.”

“Er,” said Charles, grinning.

“Oh boy!” laughed John. “Yeah, I guess she really *wasn't* playing with a full deck, there, was she?”

Tom grinned. “Sure, yeah, she was nuts,” he said, biting into another wedge of pizza.

“Well, *I've* got one for *you* –” Charles began.

“Wait, son,” said Tom, cutting him off. “I promised you a weirdie, a weirdie you shall get. I’m not done yet, so shut up and let me finish, will you?”

“– To go back to the point at which I was so rudely interrupted,” he continued as Charles glared and muttered something under his breath, “the shrink apparently hated his daughter because she was far, far brighter than he’d ever dreamed of being, not to mention the fact that she didn’t share his own view of people and life, which basically came down to Screw or Be Screwed. Then, of course, she’d been a daughter, rather than the son he’d wanted. And ... oh, who the hell knows why?”

“Then, when she reached puberty, of course things became complicated by what you might call the, er, Humbert Humbert syndrome. – No, come to think of it, ol’ HH only liked the ones with no hair on their ... er. Ahem.” He cleared his throat in embarrassment, trying not to look at me or Jodi.

“Yes? Go on,” Jodi urged ingenuously.

“Damn, Tom, we’re not exactly dithering mimosas, you know?” I snapped at him. “For heaven’s sake, will you go *on!* – Jeez, man, you’re red as Lenin on May Day!”

“Ladies – which you aren’t – you ought to be ashamed of yourselves!” he told Jodi and me darkly. “Scandalous, you are. Corrupt my morals ...

“Anyway,” he continued, “some sex thing seemed to have gotten mixed up with his original dislike of his daughter, and he started putting heat on her – calling her names all the time, ranging from psychiatric to dumb to just plain filthy; using any excuse at all, even making up excuses out of thin air to punish her, usually by destroying or otherwise taking something she loved or wanted away from her.

“But the fucker was of course clever about it. He never hit her. Never laid a hand on her. He coerced his wife into covering up for him . . .

“Now *her*, his wife, he beat up all the time. Unlike the girl, you see, who by law had to go to school every day, her mother had no strong reason requiring her to go out at all, since they could have groceries trucked in and she didn’t have any friends or relatives in town or anyone else who might become concerned when she didn’t appear in public, and he could keep her in the house while the bruises and broken bones healed, and who cares about wife-beating, anyway? Oh, Jesus! – You know, I *really* hope Women’s Liberation succeeds, because I’m getting awfully fucking sick and tired of coming out to bust up the ten-millionth ‘fight’ between Mr. and Ms. Whoozis, and she goes into the hospital, and some fancy lawyer comes down and gets the son of a bitch she’s married to bailed out right when we’re booking him and he never goes to jail at all, and then ten-million-and-first time she dies, and nobody cares, man, and I ... Well, that’s neither here nor there, is it?” Hawking harshly, Tom spat onto the floor by way of punctuation. One of the student busboys, sighing as he walked up to clean up the floor where Tom had spat, glared at him reproachfully. Ignoring him, Tom went right on with his tale. “Sorry for the digression.

“So anyway, the girl began ‘being silly,’ as her father put it. – That is, she began to act just like someone who is undergoing a nervous breakdown. As a psychiatrist, her old man *had* to have known exactly what was wrong with her. But of course he himself was the reason for it, and didn’t seem at all inclined to quit being the reason any time soon, as long as he had any say in it. As you might expect under the circumstances, he dismissed her obvious breakdown in terms of something like a juvenile prank or simple childishness, and did nothing to get her into real therapy for it. Why were none of us surprised?”

“So what happened?”

“Well, January came along, and with it came the rains. And then, one stormy late afternoon in mid-January, the bastard calls us in a towering rage, saying that his daughter had ‘run off,’ leaving a note for him that ‘read nonsense,’ saying she was going up on the mountains back of Santa Real to call up Grandfather Eagle to give him what he deserved, and would we ‘run the bitch in?’ Wherever it was she was actually

headed, she hadn't taken a car. Apparently she was going to hitch-hike, or at least take the bus – she was too young to have a driver's license, and had never learned to drive, anyway. And because her father had strictly supervised her activities and severely restricted her social life, she had no friends who might have given her a ride. So she was on foot, unless, of course, she could hitch a ride from someone or took a bus.

“On top of this, just before he called, we got another call, this one from a very concerned woman who lived just off East Camina Cima – that road that runs up to the TV station off Highway 150 – who told us that just a little earlier that evening she'd seen someone climbing San Miguel Peak, which was very near her home. She saw whoever it was in the glare from a lightning flash, though not very well, and it made her curious. So she got out a pair of binoculars her late husband had brought back from his hitch in the Korean War and, in the next flash of lightning, she could just make out that the climber was a girl, a young girl who was dressed far too skimpily for such cold, rainy weather. But then the girl climbed down into a ravine or canyon, so our caller couldn't see her any longer. It was raining far too hard for her to go check it out herself at first hand, since she'd recently come down with the 'flu recently and still hadn't completely recovered. But she really thought the girl might be in danger, so she called us in case a rescue was needed.

“Well, putting two and two together, we got a crew together as fast as we could and went out to find the girl, cussing all the way. It was too wet to have much chance of finding her, not to mention driving up there on those Goddamn' slick roads this late in the day, but it wasn't quite wet or dark enough to justify postponing a search until after the rain stopped.

“When we got up there, we found we'd been preceded by the girl's father, who'd decided to make sure we Did Our Duty. Fucker'd borrowed a jeep from a neighbor of his, and had arrived at the foot of the peak just before we did. We couldn't stop him -- he was ten or twenty feet ahead of us all the way, even though the rocks were so slick from the rain that they might as well have been soaped. So with him leading, and us chasing him as much as her, we worked our way up that deep, treacherous ravine that makes a seam up the back of the hill to this ledge that overlooks several deep canyons running behind that range of hills.

“– Hills, *hell* – they were fuckin' *mountains!* Johnny, remember that book *Inferno* by Niven and Pournelle you wanted me to read? Well, I finally did get the time to read it. (You were right, it was one hell of a read!) Remember that place just below the First Circle, where Benito and Allen Carpenter look down into Hell before descending into it? It looked something like they'd have seen there – or even like the original might have looked to Dante and Virgil: A thousand-foot fall, since the range behind the hills to our north is part of a table-land that gradually descends to the cold-desert region east of here; a sky the color of squid-ink where it wasn't jet-black – or a weird, ionized electric purple like a defective black-light or A-bomb green from lightning! The jaws of Hell, man, that's what it was! And it had fangs to go with it, down there at the bottom of the canyon – spires and pillars and jumbles of solid rock, up to twenty feet high, with no ground cover on them at all!

“Then we saw the girl. She was sitting on a spur of rock ten feet above this narrow, rain-flooded, muddy ledge and a hundred yards to our right.

“She was in a sort of – a kind of *ecstasy*, an exalted trance, and you couldn't tell just what the source of that exaltation was: Joy, hate, fear, fury, despair, grief, love – none of those and all of those and something 'way beyond any of those were all part of it. The rain ran off her face in great, shining sheets and filled her long, unbound, dark hair so that it shone silver-green under the lightning, and her face shone livid blue and green and even gold in the lightning-flashes. All she was wearing was this a little, white, thin, peasant blouse embroidered around the yoke and the hems with little blue and yellow flowers, khaki shorts, some feathers in her hair, and a turquoise-and-silver bracelet. That was all, man, not even sandals or tennis shoes to protect her feet.

“There she sat, cross-legged, Indian-style, her hands uplifted to the sky, her eyes rolled back in her head so only the whites showed. And she was chanting.

“The storm robbed most of her chant of whatever sense it had, but every once in a while she'd yell out a part of it – and odd thing, every time she did, a bolt of lightning cracked down the sky, like punctuation.”

“Aw, Tom...” said Charles impatiently.

“No shit, man!” Tom snapped. “That's what we noticed – but I will give you this: those lightning bolts came so often, anyway, and the storm was so loud, that we probably missed the times she yelled and nothing happened.”

“– Anyway, her dad, who's ahead of us all the way, immediately makes for the rocky spur where the girl's sitting. He's cussin' a blue streak, screaming things at her even *we'd* never heard before – and man, you can

bet your last dollar we hear *everything* in our line of work! The sumbitch's so loud we can hear him clearly above the storm! In spite of the fact that he's fifty pounds overweight and thirty years out of condition – I guess even the rich assholes at the Monte Vallejo Heights Tennis Club finally had it with him, and yanked his court privileges or something – this turkey hauls himself up to where his daughter was, almost one-handed. Then he begins slapping her and trying to pull her down off the rock-spur.

“Finally she turns, and looks straight at him. The whites of her eyes aren't showing like did before, but she's staring at him like a horse gone mad on locoweed, wearing an expression the likes of which I've only seen on days-old stiff before the morticians get to them: like, a smile straight out of the Pit. Hate is far, *far* too weak a word for what she must have felt for him – not that I blame her!

“Her eyes look like burning sulfur in the lightning-flashes. It finally begins to get through even to him, for just a second or two; he drew back – we're just finally getting up to where the two of them are, ourselves, and can see them both fairly clearly.

“And now the bastard recovers himself. Rearing back, he howls ‘Slut! You fucking little whore!’ at her and aims a round-house punch at her.

“It never connects. Just as he tenses to make his punch, her mouth opens in this sunken-in gape as she throws back her head, eyes closed, flings up her hands and moans, ‘Kee-OWW-*ohaaauww* ...’”

I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck as he did his imitation of her cry. Everyone else at the table flinched, even Charles, who wasn't quite able to cover it, even with his best effort to do so.

“His punch never connects,” Tom went on. “Sheet-lightning suddenly covers the sky, high up. By its light, for just an instant, we see these three black, winged shapes diving straight down at the girl and her old man. We're, like, paralyzed by the sight of them, unable to move when, moments later, they strike.

“Or rather, the middle one does, sinking what I swear to Jesus Christ and all the saints are four-inch talons full-length into the shrink's back. Screaming, the shrink pitches off the rock he's been standing on, down onto the ledge where we were, by the momentum of the attack, which carries carried him over the edge, down to the rocks below. The bird that attacked him shoots back up into the sky, wailing like a banshee, joining its two huge companions, which in the meantime were turning circles in the sky above the girl.

“– And then, the three birds ... vanished.

“That is,” he said, looking over at Charles, “there was another blast of sheet-lightning, then a regular bolt of the stuff, and we were so dazzled by the sky-pyrotechnics that we could barely see anything, as it was. Somewhere in there, the birds disappeared, maybe while we were still rubbing the fireballs out of our eyes.

“Also, right about then the girl pitched off the rock where she'd been sitting, unconscious and exhausted, and we had to scramble to catch her. We were too busy to be watching for anything else. Either way, we didn't see the birds go.

“Well, we got the girl down off the rock safely, and took her to St. Mary's Hospital back down in Santa Real, where she was treated for exposure and shock. – She subsequently completely recovered, by the way, and is now on the Dean's list at a very good girl's school beck East.

“Anyway, as soon as we could, we went back for her father – after the rain stopped and we could get back up in there to reach him. By that time, of course, the dude was very dead – he'd fallen hundreds of feet onto the rocks, and there was no way he could have survived.

“It took us a week to decide just how to write it all up so we wouldn't all get hauled away to that nice, warm place where the nuts hunt the squirrels once our superiors reviewed it. We finally closed the case as ‘death due to misadventure,’ like I said, and that was that.”

“But those birds – what about them?” John reminded him.

“Oh, yeah, the birds.” Reaching into his pants' -pocket, Tom said, “Oh ... I dunno. What would you say wore feathers like these? – I've been keeping these as a good-luck charm,” he explained, a little sheepishly. Also,” he went on, glaring at Charles, “sometimes I sort of take them out and look at them . . . to remind myself that I don't know everything, and never will .... Here.” So saying, he pulled an envelope out of his pocket, and took out several feathers, heavy and long, an oily greenish-black in color, and some shorter, golden-tan, all rubber-banded together. Dark, gluey soil, almost tarry in color and consistency, was still embedded in them.

“*Condors* –” breathed John, inspecting them. “And that's ... yes, they *are*. Those are the tail-feathers of a Harpy Eagle! You – you say you found these at the site?”

**Satisfaction: A Comedy**

By Yael R. Dragwyla

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“Uh, no, not exactly” said Tom. He now pulled a second, rubber-banded bundle of feathers out of the envelope. ‘Now *these did* come from the site. Take a look – compare these to that first bunch of feathers, people.”

We did, passing them among ourselves, They were identical, point for point, right down to the bits of tarry, gluey dirt caught in them.

“I can’t tell any difference between them – and this dirt?” asked John.

“That’s right,” said Tom. “Even the soil-types of that muck stuck in the feathers is identical. “But the thing is, in neither case is it soil from the area In which the shrink was killed. You see, those feathers in that second bunch, they drifted down into a branch of a bush next to the rock where the girl had perched, and I took them out of that bush and ran them through a forensic analysis myself.”

“Don’t tell me,” snorted Charles. ‘The first bundle’s from the La Brea Tar Pits.’”

“Close, Charlie – but you don’t win no cee-gar.” Tom wore a grin like a skull. His eyes were invisible behind the Polaroid glare of the lenses of his glasses, which had been turned into molten silver by the overheads. “They were from some of the bird carcasses we found in that ‘garden’ we dug up at the shrink’s place in Valle Grosse.”

## **12. Chas Addams: Zen to Zen**

Black roses growing in snow  
Mark the path down which love has fled  
From a world in which plastic flowers  
Line concrete-covered meadows  
And the banks of inflammable rivers;  
Ski-tracks between the roses  
Tell the lover even more certainly  
Where to go  
To find runaway love:  
They curve around the wends and bends  
Of the path the roses mark,  
Bracketing here a tree, there a post,  
Sometimes, for yards, vanishing altogether  
In the soft snow,  
But always reappearing.

I have promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep –  
The promises were made under duress.  
Fuck the highway.  
I'll follow the roses.

## **13. The Ravishing of the Wizard's Only Daughter by the High King of R'lyeh**

On the Western shores of the Ocean Sea,  
By the Door to the Halls of Persephone,  
Past meadows rife with asphodel,  
In a bower in a haunted, tenebrous dell  
By the bloody rapids of Acheron,  
The wailing darkness of Hades' Deeps,  
The vast, crepuscular Abyss of Dream,  
Where Death His dark cathedral keeps –  
There the High King bears me down on his bed,  
Below the rotting rocks of his haunted hills,  
And from the boiling cauldrons of my heart,  
There he drinks his slavering fill . . .  
. . . While I drink from that same dark fountain's source,  
Where worlds collide, and Suns give birth,  
And Eternity runs its endless course –  
And the hands of a God heal the savaged Earth.



## **14. Holocaust Event**

*Springtime on the River Styx. Carboniferous follies. Midnight recyclers. Lacework skeletonizers. I couldn't decide on a suitable subtitle. You pick.*

Carnivorous butterflies  
With wings of Teflon and aluminum  
And guts of rotten lard  
Sit quietly upon  
A fleshless, polished skull,  
Letting their meal digest,  
Preening the blood from their probosces  
With delicate gestures of steel-spiked feet,  
Chattering among themselves  
In the soft, breathless whispers  
Of the mad.

## **15. Heat-Death**

Here there is night everlasting.

\* \* \*

A Plutonian Sun  
Strikes wizened rubies  
From ice-encrusted rocks  
With a brittle, time-crystallized chisel  
Of old, dying light.  
The ragged, threadbare skirts  
Of the galaxy  
Droop forlornly  
Over abysses of night:  
No seamstress now lives  
To mend them,  
Nor ever shall again:  
Even Spider-Woman  
Has spun Her last webs.

## 16. Pornography as High Art: The Literature of Erotic Horror

This piece was originally published first, in *EIDOS* and then in *APAEROS*

After an interval of many years, since I first encountered it in my college years (yes, Junior – somewhere back there in the Lower Cretaceous), I have just re-read Pauline Reag 's *Story of O*, one of the best-known and, in its way, greatest of all modern erotic novels. And something occurred to me now, after so many years (okay, *okay*, kid – the Upper *Devonian*) of wide reading in all forms of modern literature together with a great deal of thought about what I've read, that would not, *could* not have occurred to me then, in those relatively innocent times:

The fact that *Story of O* is, frankly, a true sexual turn-on disguises its actual nature. This novel isn't just pornography, or even a species of genuine erotica – it's a *horror* story, a cautionary tale with poisonous fangs, every bit as much so as anything by Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell, Clive Barker, R. R. McCammon, or H. P. Lovecraft himself. It is a masterful illumination of one of the darkest corners of the soul, the part of us which, left unchecked, is quite capable of surrendering us over, body and soul, to an all-powerful someone or something else, whether the excuse be "love," lust, greed, or sheer, raw hunger for power at any price – a part of ourselves which will quite happily go along with any and all evils, including those done to itself, in order to "belong" to someone or something more powerful than us, which can make all our decisions for us, and assume all our responsibilities. *Story of O* is thus also the story of Germany's *Drittes Reich*, the use of the atomic bomb on civilian populations (and the planning for use of thermonuclear devices on a Planet-killing scale in future wars) for "reasons of national interest," the Inquisition, the publicly conducted mass-murder by fire of millions of innocent women, children, and men accused of the heresy of "witchcraft." If not for public acquiescence, tacit and otherwise, in such evils, they could never have occurred – and if not for the imp in that dark little niche deep in ourselves so beautifully illuminated by *Story of O*, the one so eager to hand over the reins of our destinies to others, they never *would* have. The genders of and erotic pastimes indulged in by the characters portrayed in *Story of O* are, if you will, only masks worn by that demon of denial within us all.

Of course, horror has its own delicious attractions – the old, unbowdlerized *National Enquirer* made its fortune off public fascination with horror, attested to by its prominently displayed on-site photographs of grisly accidents, horrible burn-cases, etc. In fact, horror and erotica are often distinguishable only by means of a 180 swing between *control* and *lack* of it, between who is doing what to whom and who is on the receiving end of that doing.

Many women are repelled and sickened by what is commonly called pornography – the erotic inextricably commingled with violence and malice (will-to-violence) – because they *automatically equate women, hence themselves, with the victims, never the victimizers*. This is true even when the victims in these works are male or young children. The common experience of women in most cultures throughout history has been that of second-class citizen and victim rather than as part of the power elite and victimizer. So many women find any sort of scenario in which the erotic is tied in with terrorization and assault on an unwilling victim utterly repellent because they can't help identifying with the victim.

But Pauline Reag 's *Story of O* forces the reader to consciously abandon that equation as a universal truth, and thus it becomes powerfully erotic even for women – often embarrassingly so. "How can I possibly be one of the *good* guys (= victim) if *this* horrible stuff turns me on?" one is forced to ask oneself. The answer is: because the capacity to get turned on by erotic violence is *universal*, not only among human beings but perhaps among primates in general, whether or not that capacity is ever exercised or even developed to any extent, *regardless* of one's "goodness" or "badness" – and often, all it takes to get turned on by it is a viewpoint wherein one ends up in the driver's seat instead of being on the (ahem!) butt end of it. Which *Story of O* enables *both* men and women to do – which is why it's a classic.

The anonymously written *A Man and a Maid*, published by Grove Press back in the 1960s, is another classic of this sort. In this case, however, throughout the book the one man in it is clearly in complete control of the situation and all the women in it at all times. Any control over one another or themselves which any of its female characters may acquire is always obviously subordinate to his dominion over them,

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and usually at his behest and direction. But that aside, the novel does show, clearly and even grossly, the intermingling of horror with the erotic that is so characteristic of pornography: there is some helpless person, A, at the mercy of a second individual, B, who obviously relishes his or her complete freedom to molest A in any way which B cares to employ. Moreover, these molestations do not stop at A's body – they go far beyond mere physical rape to violation of mind, soul, and spirit, so that in the end A is *forced* by B to *enjoy* these torments. And torments they are, indeed, not merely sexual attentions – they are, in fact, *torture disguised as sex*. In other words, B, the one in control, *enjoys wielding power over A even more than having sex as such with him or her*; not only is A helpless to resist whatever B wishes to do to him/her, but also, slowly but relentlessly surely, A is forced to *enjoy being controlled and tortured by B*.

*A Man and a Maid*, like *Story of O*, is thus the story of the slow, erotically compelling corruption and destruction of a soul. It is therefore also a perfect exemplar of the literature of horror. At the same time, it's *sexy as hell*, a real turn-on. Reading it made me exquisitely, excruciatingly randy – whether or not it “should” have. Which is why these two novels, *A Man and a Maid* and *Story of O*, are supreme examples of the genre of pornography. In the hands of a master of this sort of thing, such as the creators of these two novels, the elements of soul-chilling horror and sublime eroticism are *precisely* balanced, interwoven with such exquisite care that it is not possible to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. That's *not* gutter-writing, people, by any means – *that* is the absolute *pinnacle* of the writer's art! Stephen King could do no better.

After all is said and done of such matters, we must go on to ask: still, is it safe to leave this stuff lying around where impressionable people, who might be inspired to Do Fiendish Things to others by it, can find it? I got news for you, darlin': we got all the inspiration to Do such Things anyone could ever need built right into our own nature, needing only the proper combination of frustration, horniness, and rage to draw it forth, and only opportunity to provide a victim for its complete expression. Complete illiterates can be, and often are, far greater fiends than the literate, even those whose literacy extends only to “schlock” such as pornography. The literature of the erotic and the violent basically provides a forum of discussion of these things, not schools for training in them. Eliminate the forum and you eliminate one of the best tools we have for studying, exploring, and coming to terms with the sociopsychology of violence, erotic and otherwise. As a cop of my acquaintance once told me, “Well, lady, if you're gonna catch 'em, you gotta know what they do!”

Now, in all honesty, I dig well-done erotica/pornography at least as much as anyone else, having an extremely strong libido, lots of imagination, and the unashamed will to exercise both. But beyond pure self-aggrandizement, I suggest to those who are so anxious to *protect* us all “from ourselves,” to eliminate from the scene anything that might be the least teensy bit “harmful to the public,” that you consider what the successful elimination of all public access to the literature of the erotic, violent and otherwise, would mean. It would thereby also eliminate a tool of enormous potential power for gathering intelligence about this sort of activity *as it actually goes on among people*. Without such intelligence, assuming that all such activity is bad, we can never know enough about it to eliminate it once and for all on a universal scale – or have any hope of finding out whether at least some of it is necessary to our psychosocial and sociospiritual well-being. We would therefore be far better off refraining from too great a zeal in our attempts to suppress it.

Either way, rather than being detrimental, pornography contains vast, untapped stores of treasure, and we'd be fools to eliminate it, even if we could do so. *Story of O* and *A Man and a Maid* are God-sends – gifts to us not only from Eros, but also from the Gods of social and political wisdom, as well. We would do well to treat them and all their ilk as the gifts they are, and not commit the truly *stupid* sacrilege of trying to destroy them and suppress the creation of more like them.

## **17. Soul-Pirates:**

### **Song of the Tartarian Boatmen**

We dwell in nights  
Of ten thousand suns,  
Follow canyons of flame  
Where the fire-river runs,  
Trapping lithium hares  
And hydrogen bears,  
Stealing radium cubs  
From pitchblende lairs.  
We are the Gypsies  
Roving endless years,  
Trading in nightmares  
And profitable fears  
For golden dreams  
And cinnamon lusts,  
Taking meat from your pies  
And paying you crusts.

## **18. Three From Fort Fresno: Tales of a Post-Nuclear Landscape**

### **1. Art Project**

#### **From Book 1, Part 1 of *The Dragon at War***

*As extrapolated from the journals of Baron Kevin Bjorn of Fort Fresno, found in the ruins of Fresno and in several of his caches in the desert outside it after the Destruction of Fresno, and supplemented with eyewitness testimony from one of the late Olaf Reichert's former students and followers, as given in camera at Fort Sacramento on March 16, 2049:*

*. . . Enamored of untrammelled power, long before leaving Seattle for California and the outbreak of the Two-Day War, Kevin Bjorn experimented with ever-darker varieties of occultism in his attempts to acquire as much power as possible. To that end, while still a boy in Minnesota during one of his strange, unexplained Summer disappearances from home, hanging out with neo-Nazis in their training camp in the Minnesota Woods, he became an initiate of the Masters of the Silver Twilight. Many years later, in 2007, he attained the rank of Keeper of the Silver Gate in that order at an initiatory ceremony in Portland, Oregon. Getting together at various times and in various places with other initiates as well as non-initiate occultists in Seattle, between 2007 and 2022 Bjorn participated in numerous rituals the intent of which was to call up more and more powerful entities from the Inner Planes, the Powers, Dominions, and Thrones that are Hell's nobility, in his endless attempts to gain power and favor from them and, if possible, mastery over them. In doing so, he and his confreres invoked Satan and even worse entities, and then, under the shield of those Powers, they evoked demons of all kinds. Not long before leaving Seattle for California in 2022, at ten minutes past midnight on May 16, 2022, at an old farm well off the main roads at Ukiah, Oregon (118° 55' 53" W longitude, 45° 08' 03" latitude), Bjorn and several others accomplished what was for Bjorn his first true breakthrough into the Inner Planes. The Master, the leader of the group and the most experienced of them, created a Portal and ushered them all through it, setting a lone neophyte, Brigit Everbright, to watching the Portal from our world while the Master guided the others through to that other world and then back again. While they were there, Bjorn went wandering off on his own, outraging the Master, then returned, bearing a mysterious ring which, he claimed, had been given to him by one Nyarlathotep, Messenger of the Great Old Ones.*

*At first, Master Olaf Reichert, the head priest of the cabal and the teacher of the initiates, who was by then furious with Bjorn, was ready to discipline Bjorn then and there, cursing him and ejecting him from the group. However, on seeing that ring, he hesitated. Made of what might have been electrum and hoary with age, the ring had the appearance of a fat, heavy viper twisted around itself into a circlet just big enough for a big man's ring finger, a 20-karat emerald he'd have bet anything was real encircled by eight blue star sapphires set into the broad head of the serpent. The emerald glowed with lambent green fire, and he would have sworn the stars in the sapphires twinkled. On the underside of the ring, below the seat of the emerald, a complex sigil had been carved, one he wasn't familiar with.*

*The ring looked altogether too real. If it was in fact the real deal, that is, truly something given to Bjorn by Nyarlathotep, disciplining Bjorn would outrage the giver, who would then direct his wrath at the Reichert. Ultimately Reichert only muttered a few epithets at Bjorn, then escorted all of his followers, Bjorn included, back into the mundane world, and closed the Portal.*

*Which was a serious strategic error. For, after returning to Seattle, Bjorn used the ring to call on Nyarlathotep and ask that entity to eliminate all those who had taken part in the ritual save himself in various, seemingly unconnected ways that would not be traced back to Bjorn – which, in fact, happened within a space of three days, beginning one day after the ritual had taken place. All but Reichert and Brigit Everbright, the acolyte who had remained behind while the rest went through the portal to the Inner Planes, died in what appeared to be a tragic accident in which the van they were riding in at the*

*time collided head-on with a speeding 3-rig 18-wheeler that had lost traction on one of the Oregon portion of I-5's notoriously steep hills and hit the van going at something like 130 mph (209 kph) on a 10% downhill slope.*

*Reichert himself died most tragically two days later in his own home in Corvallis, where Everbright had been staying temporarily while her house in Salem was being fumigated to rid it of weird, enormous green beetles of an unknown species that had suddenly appeared there, apparently from nowhere, coincidentally the day of the van accident in which the others had perished. The beetles had bitten her dog, which perished in foaming convulsions an hour later; swept out into the back yard in a green, coleopterous tidal wave and destroyed all his chickens; spread out from there into the yards of neighbors on all sides, biting them and their children, pets, and livestock, killing many; and had failed to murder her only because she had then run out the front door, jumped into her car, and high-tailed it out of there, down the road, to where she could use her cell phone to call a pest-control service and arrange for them to meet her about a block from her house.*

*After meeting up with the pest-control people and giving them a duplicate key to get into her house – she'd made that at a nearby True-Value Hardware just before meeting up with them; and as she had little in her house that anyone might want to steal, she didn't worry about home security at that point, just gave them the key and a check and then headed out, anywhere but that house! – she called Reichert and asked if she could stay there for a few days. Reichert said yes, and so she took some clothes she purchased on the way to Reichert's and moved in. But that same night, she was hit with a wave of irrational dread so powerful that without telling Reichert, she grabbed her things, went out to her car, and took off, heading south, unwilling even to spend one night in Reichert's house. Ms. Everbright, now utterly terrified of Reichert and everything connected with him, had taken off for the tall timbers, heading for Northern California, settling for a while under an assumed name in Redding, and ultimately making her home in Fort Sacramento.*

*In the middle of the night, Reichert's house burned down with him in it. The coroner's office and the Salem police department's forensic experts determined that the fire had been the result of Reichert's having fallen asleep with a lit cigarette in one hand. The fact that Reichert had never smoked a single cigarette in all his 50 years, even marijuana (he'd always stuck to truly heavy-duty shit, sneering at the idea of descending to the level of what he called "Hippie-weed") never seemed to occur to them.*

*It was now March of 2022. Back at the ranch, or at any rate, the hydroponics/grow-lights store, Bjorn read the news accounts of both tragedies with glee and gusto. As it happened, the ring had been given to him by Nyarlathotep, who had also told Bjorn about a tremendous world upheaval that would occur in just a few months, and had told Bjorn to make ready to bug out from Seattle by early Summer. He told Bjorn to contact one of the DEA officers for whom Bjorn narked, as part of the deal he'd made to get out of prison time on a huge drug bust through which he and his operation had been netted, and ask the agent to call him as soon as that agent learned from his own contacts when that prophesied catastrophe would likely occur. World War 3 was coming, said Nyarlathotep, who had then told Bjorn to round up various people and make ready for it. For if they played their cards right, they could end up becoming absolute despots over a "great empire in California" – actually, an empire on the Inner Planes; on the Outer Planes, it would be a large city, and they would have dominion over everyone living in it, forever. Bjorn, ever lusting after as much power as he could get, agreed. Nyarlathotep also told Bjorn to keep the ring he had given him, because it would enable Bjorn not only to contact numerous Outer Gods and Other Gods, but also to enter and leave the Inner Planes at will, as long as he used the instructions Nyarlathotep gave him on a packet of scrolls he had handed to Bjorn before Bjorn left to re-enter the mundane world.*

*Once back in Seattle, Bjorn, worried about heavy occult competition, used the ring to call on Nyarlathotep and ask him to eliminate the threats presented by the others who had taken part in that ritual. And so it was.*

*Later, after arrival at and conquest of the city of Fresno, California, Bjorn created several local portals or gateways into the Inner Planes, one behind a sliding panel in the "recreation" (torture) room of the place he had appropriated as his own, the rest outside the new walls around Fresno. The first, the one in his torture room, was the first such portal to be created, the establishment of which took place as the razor-wire fences were going up to keep the former citizens of Fresno – now the slaves of Bjorn and his followers – inside the devastated city. (The great wooden-I-bar-and-chain-link walls went up later.)*

## Pornography as High Art

By Yael R. Dragwyla

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Once the portals had been established, Bjorn established contact with several more dominations, thrones, and powers of the Inner Planes, principally in the Tunnels of Set, promising them at least one human sacrifice per lunar month in exchange for various favors and powers, to wit:

- ❖ *Immortality (conditional: “You cannot be killed by anyone or anything except a man who is not merely a man, or a bear who is not merely a bear; and there will come a time when you truly wish for oblivion”); Bjorn, unable to understand subtleties by then, due to all the drugs he’d wallowed in and the STDs he’d caught and only half-cured since boyhood, decided that meant he couldn’t be killed by anything, and accepted, because he also couldn’t imagine a set of circumstances in which he’d want to die);*
- ❖ *Unlimited power over his subjects (the slaves of Fresno);*
- ❖ *Never-ending largesse in the form of food, luxuries, medical supplies, and recreational drugs of all kinds, including many provided by the Great Old Ones themselves, never otherwise found on Earth (conditional: “Only as long as you live; and while there will always be enough to meet your basic needs, and the drugs will flow freely, you must guard your treasures carefully, lest underlings steal them and use them against you.” Again Bjorn heard only what he wanted to in that, and not the implicit message: “You can be defeated, even killed.”); and*
- ❖ *Extreme sexual satisfaction (granted unconditionally; but the Great Old One’s ideas of “extreme” and “sexual” weren’t perhaps as Bjorn conceived of them).*

*Bjorn gave the Great Old Ones two human sacrifices: a baby, and a grown slave, a man he’d ordered to carry the baby while accompanying Bjorn into the Other Side (“We’re going someplace to give the baby a good home – I’m not a monster!” Bjorn had told the cringing slave, who had been idiot enough to believe him – or maybe not an idiot; Bjorn was armed and he wasn’t). The Great Old Ones told Bjorn, “We are well pleased with these sacrifices.” The slaves were left chained to slabs of rock (Bjorn had used a gun to get the man to crawl up on to the slab so Bjorn could shackle him there), screaming as the Great Old Ones descended on them. At the following Full Moon, when Bjorn returned with another sacrifice, this one alone, in chains, the first two sacrifices were still alive (sort of), still screaming, though they both looked as if they’d been run through a meat-grinder. A third slab of rock was there, waiting for the newbie, chains already in place, waiting to be used. (Bjorn had drugged the new one, a thin, sickly boy of around 16, to make sure he didn’t try to struggle against his fate.)*

*By then, Bjorn had enlisted Larry Fein to keep track of the phases of the Moon for him, even on cloudy days and nights, and notify him three days in advance of each Full Moon. As insurance, Bjorn asked the Great Old Ones to allow him to miss a synodical sacrifice or two in a row as long as he got word to them within a day or two to let them know what had happened to prevent him from turning up on time, and brought at least two sacrifices for every one he had missed when he called on them again . . .*

*(Nota bene: In what follows, be it noted that the names of the “Great Old Ones” are enclosed in quotes when they are speaking among themselves, because they are not and never were the Great Old Ones of the Cthulhu Mythos originating with Howard Phillips Lovecraft, but rather imposters running a con on dupes of many worlds whom they recruit to gather victims for their horrific “art projects.” However, those names are not enclosed in quote marks when used by those same dupes, who genuinely believe that the monsters are what they claim to be, and have no hint of their duplicity.)*

May 16, 2022, 12:10 a.m. PDT, Ukiah, Oregon (118° 55’ 53” W longitude, 45° 08’ 03” latitude):

“And then,” said “Nyarlatotep,” “Becky says, ‘If you wanna put *that* thing in *there*, you gotta’ – oops, here they come,” he told “Yog-Sothoth,” his voice dropping so the newbies filing in after Reichert, staring all around them in wide-eyed wonder, like a bevy of “Ghroth’s” stupider chicks, won’t hear him.

Sighing, turning toward the approaching parade of neophytes, “Yog-Sothoth” assumed what he hoped was a dignified-looking appearance – you didn’t want to scare the little buggers away before you’d gotten them hooked and, just maybe, ready to turn on one of their own to give you a sacrifice. In they filed,



obediently taking their places over there at the near side of the Square of Deities, next to the Lair of Fthaggua, one of the many vast stone buildings lining the square, this one used primarily for rituals of various kinds, but also as a classroom of sorts when these idiot *humans* came calling. Far above, the swarming, swimming star-hordes swirled and danced and clustered and broke apart again, the fiery, delicately-hued tails of the comets that streaked through their midst casting twinned and tripled and quadrupled shadows in pale, pastel imitations of the hues of their sources. *Gaaahhhh . . .* he thought, *they sound like a covey a demented bats, twitter-twitter-twitter! Well, we'll just have to put up with it – this is a more likely bunch than usual, I'd say there's at least three sacrifices worth in here, plus maybe some useful dupes. Reichert, old boy, if you can keep the quality up, we just may be able to help you out with that contract you wanted. Then, sighing, On the other hand, given the average calibre of the groups you bring in here, I won't count on the future bringing anything much better than this lot . . . or even as good as these are. Well, let's see how it turns out . . .*

As the last of the neophytes came through the Portal – Master Reichert himself, the first one through, had stepped well to the side so that the newbies wouldn't fall over him as they came through (and he could put a flea in their oh-so-innocent ears to let them know that they'd better do exactly as they'd been told by him and the other ranking members of the Order, so they wouldn't queer the deal – Yog-Sothoth blinked, wondering if he was seeing what he thought he was. “O, gross!” he hissed at “Nyarlatotep” out of the corner of his mouth, nudging his confrere in the ribs and gesturing with a tentacle extruded for the purpose to indicate the one he meant.

“Oh, yeah! That one's right gnarly, ain't he?” said “Nyarlatotep,” grinning, not caring whether any of the *humans*, including Reichert – *especially* Reichert – understood what he was saying or not.

“Oh, *ecchhh!*” said “Idh-yaa,” wrinkling her long, green proboscis in distaste. “What *is* that one – a refugee from a toxic waste dump or something?”

“Like, gag me with a spoon, Daddio!” “Pharol” agreed, laughing, whipping his long, tarry tentacles about for emphasis. “Idh-yaa” glared at him when one of them stuck to her carapace. Ignoring her venomous hiss, “Pharol” said, grinning around his long black fangs, “I haven't seen one *that* bad since Wilbur Whately fell into the septic tank and it took two days to get him out again!”

Indeed, the last of the neophytes was the ugliest human any of them had ever seen – and almost certainly the ugliest any other human had ever had the misfortunate to encounter, as well. Not that humans were likely to win any prizes in a beauty contest any time before the end of the Multiverse – I mean, just *look* at those stupid faces of theirs, those angular, awkwardly jointed bodies without significant flex in them, the utter lack of pedipalps or tentacles or scales or . . . well, let's just say that none of them were any beauties, and let it go at that. But *that* one – *that* one would gross out even his own kind, let alone aesthetically discerning Lords of Creation such as “Yog-Sothoth” or “Idh-yaa,” with all their millions of years of savoring the very highest artistic forms and creations.

“What *is* it?” “Tsathoggua” croaked, screwing up his batrachian features as if on the verge of vomiting. “Roadkill mixed with *amitru* dung?”

“On a stick,” laughed “Pharol.” “Straight off the barbie. Too bad they don't make a brand of sauce to enhance that full, rich flavor – gaaaakkk! Pass the nachos, somebody – I think I'll forego on *this* dish!”

The object of the “Great Old Ones” conversation, hearing the buzzing, whispering, yodeling, burring, growling exchange, looked over at them. To say he was ugly was the understatement of the geological eon: a tall, gangly scarecrow of a man, his head was so warped and crushed out of true that it might have been stomped on by an elephant. Whatever had caused that frightful damage to his skull had nearly staved it in on one side; as a result, one side of his head was so skewed around that the eye on that side had been permanently pushed nearly to the point of his jaw, and was lower by at least three centimeters than the other eye. As for those eyes themselves . . . tinges of what would eventually be clearly red madness had already touched his bulbous, bulging, pale-grey eyes, which constantly rolled and turned in their sockets as if he were trying to look in all directions at once.

Nor did his other features compensate to any degree for the damage to his skull and eyes. His ragged, thin-lipped mouth, full of broken, rot-blackened teeth, was twisted toward the same side of his face as his too-low eye, the corner of his mouth almost touching the orbit of that eye. His broken, permanently swollen nose was bent far out of true, but to the side opposite that horrible eye and the bulk of his mouth, courtesy of one or more hard blows he'd sustained somewhere in his past, probably before the accident or whatever it was that had done all that damage to his skull. His light-brown hair was long, thinning, heavily grizzled,

and badly cut, a feature that wasn't improved by long, raggedy sideburns still containing traces of light brown, or by the long, equally ragged ponytail caught up behind his head in a dirty red-white-and-black ribbon.

The crowning – if that was the appropriate word for it – touch was the bristly, gun-metal-blue five-o'clock shadow that covered his lower cheeks, upper lip, lower jaw, and chin in spite of his obvious recent shave (the Band Aids or sticking plaster or whatever they were had been applied to at least half the areas covered by that nascent blue-black beard, testimony to a very clumsy use of the razor – understandable, if his had been the spastic hand responsible for all that damage). Those dark bristles looked all the more repellant against that pale, bluish-grey skin of his, so like a sickly escargot just removed from its protective housing, heavily scarred by pustulant, still-suppurating acne rosacea.

"*Hey!*" thought the scarecrow, noticing the stares of the strange entities awaiting him and the other neophytes on the other side of the Portal. "*They like me! They've noticed what a handsome fellow I am!*" he thought, preening himself and walking toward them.

"Hsstt!" Reichert was beside himself with fury. You just didn't –

"It's all right," "Daoloth" told Reichert in passable English, hooding his swarming eyes in an expression that Reichert had come to know as good humor. "Daoloth" had joined Reichert at the Portal to get a good look at the incoming mail and see if any of it would turn out to be useful to his colleagues. Now, pointing the rods studding his amorphous body at the last of the newbies, he asked, "What's the, um, acolyte's name?"

The fact that the voice in which those words were spoken had no appreciable locus in the other's body, seeming to come from some internal black hole with Daoloth's great fart-brown bulk, unnerved Reichert so much that he forgot all about the ire which Bjorn's maverick behavior, contrary to the orders the man had been given before entering the Portal with his fellow students, had aroused in him. "Uh, his . . . name? It's . . . Bjorn. Kevin Bjorn."

"*Ah* – Yog', old boy," said "Daoloth," turning to the crowd of unspeakable horrors clustered in the square just before the lone pedestal placed there – the first of the stone "canvases" to be erected there for displaying entries in the century-long contest about to begin – "the gentleman approaching you is Mr., erm, Bjorn. I think you were wondering where you could find someone to purchase that nice bridge from you?" "Daoloth" said, dropping back into the burbling, trilling patois shared by him and his colleagues. (It irritated the shit out of Reichert every time they did that – Reichert could understand some of it, but not all, and strongly suspected that the parts he did understand weren't the ones he needed to. Well, nothing for it now but to go along with his hosts – after all, they owned not only the bat, ball, and glove, but the whole damned ball-park and the Astroturf that covered it, as well. Sighing, he decided to let Daoloth and his buddies take responsibility for Bjorn – *somebody* sure as hell had to, and to be honest, he was glad it wasn't him, at least over here, on the Other Side.)

"Oh, yes," "Yog-Sothoth" twittered gleefully, rubbing two jet-black pseudopodia he extruded for the occasion together. "Of course, he'll have to come here to pick it up – we do *not* deliver!"

"Of course not," burbled "Daoloth," the rods studding his body turning bright red and swelling tumescently as his eyes swarmed around them.

(Why, thought Reichert, did that untranslatable feature of the Great Old One seem so suspiciously like the sort of malicious glee you usually saw among drunken frat-boys getting ready to pull a really nasty practical joke on a pledge . . . the sort that often turned fatal? Well, if it did turn fatal, it couldn't happen to a more deserving guy – he rued the day he'd ever agreed to let the son of a bitch enter his group and apply to become part of the Order. Let the Great Old Ones deal with Bjorn – and deal out whatever fate they deemed proper to him. He washed his hands of the creep. Maybe, if the Great Old Ones didn't seem to dislike the idea, when Reichert and his acolytes returned to Earth, he could arrange for a suitable "accident" to happen to Bjorn. Maybe the Great Old Ones would even help him in that – "Promise them anything, but give them a quick and nasty trip to Hell" seemed to be Their motto.)

Upon his reaching the group of Great Old Ones by that disquieting stone slab in the middle of the square, Bjorn, still preening, said to the being that called itself "Yog-Sothoth," "I'd like to learn everything about you, about this place – will you teach me?"

"Why, of course we will – won't we, 'Idh-yaa,' dear?" "Yog-Sothoth" said in that oddly accented version of English he used for such occasions, turning to the monstrous, deep-violet thing next to him.

“Of a surety,” she said, also in English, batting all 23 of her bright green, square-pupilled eyes at Yog-Sothoth. “Come, Mr. Bjorn, why don’t we go over there, by the Tcho-Tcho Cathedral –” she extruded a long tentacle, using it to indicate one of the many tall, eldritch, gothic-looking buildings surrounding the square, from whose arrow-slits and high, groined windows came the fitful gleams of smoky torch-light – “where we can talk this over more comfortably? Just be sure to stay within the group – as I’m sure you’ve noticed, your kind must find it very cold here –” (oh, wasn’t it! Even dressed as Reichert had admonished all of them to do, in two T-shirts under a sweat-shirt under a parka, two pairs of thermal underwear under the trousers, heavy wool socks, and high boots, from the moment he’d emerged here on the Other Side, Bjorn had had to steel himself not to flinch or giving in the urge to shiver, though every breath he took, every word he spoke belied him with thick clouds of vapor pouring from his increasingly tortured lungs) – “and only our body-heat can keep you from succumbing to the low temperatures here.”

Nodding – for once, Bjorn really didn’t want to do the talking, the way the cold and the odd, metal-rich chemistry of this atmosphere scalded his mouth and lungs every time he did so – Bjorn smiled and did his best to look cooperative.

“Good, good,” said “Idh-yaa,” companionably slipping one of her tentacles through his arm and tugging him in the direction of the cathedral. “Pharol, Azathoth, why don’t you come with us and we can discuss Mr. Bjorn’s future education among us, and ask him to help us with our, er, project?”

Fuming, Reichert watched the little group, Bjorn and the three Great Old Ones, making their way across the square and over to the great cathedral, slipping through its enormous front door and on into its nave and out of sight, with growing feelings of unease. Whatever the bastard was up to, it boded no good to anyone else. Well, he’d just have to play this one by ear, see what happened. Looking up at the star-swarmed sky – it reminded him uncomfortably of Daoloth’s countless swarming eyes, not the least reason for which was the fact that so many of those polychrome stars up there in that eternal night sky moved, gyrated around one another, or shot around and around, weaving in and out among themselves like so many thermonuclear hotrods in some endless grand drag race – he shuddered, not entirely from the cold. *Though there is that, isn’t there?* he thought morosely, wrapping his arms around his body, trying not to show how uncomfortable the cold made him (never show weakness before the Great Old Ones! Never!). Between that ghastly, bone-chilling cold, as if someone had opened a window on naked outer space and let out all the heat, and the lung-burning, simultaneously acidic and alkaline atmosphere, combining the worst features of both ends of the pH scale, he *hated* coming here. Too bad, though – it was his only hope of negotiating a contract with the Great Old Ones, the contract, the one that would not only make him rich and restore his youth, but also see him safely to a new life with a new identity on the other side of the Iron Curtain. If these “acolytes” only knew what some of them were intended for . . . In which case, God help him. Only God could – and he wasn’t fool enough to think God was likely to. Studying with these freaks was one thing – becoming part of a Big Mac Special served up, piping hot and still screaming, to Great Cthulhu himself was something *nobody* wanted any part of. Though the possibility was just the thing to keep the more promising applicants to the Order in line – the best of them were also the strongest and brightest, and as he wasn’t getting any younger, faster, stronger, or smarter himself, at least without that contract, he needed every incentive he could find, negative as well as positive, to keep them from going for his throat rather than doing his bidding.

*Let’s hope that that’s what Idh-yaa wants with Bjorn. Please, please, please? Pretty please with cosmic sugar on top? Anything to get rid of the guy! I should never have let the bastard twist my arm to take him on as an acolyte, just had Jeff take him down to the old mine shaft, shoot him, and drop him down the shaft – nobody would have found him there in a million years! Instead, I let myself get roped in for some nose-candy and a bag of crystal meth,* he thought, hating himself. *And then he started talking about that friend of his in the DEA . . . Never let any of them find out what your vices are! Never!*

Trying to look as if he hadn’t a care in the world – and sure he was a miserable failure at it – he watched the group of neophytes and acolytes over at the edge of the square, being carefully sorted into four groups and then herded off into the Lair of Fthaggua for instruction.

*Instruction. Yeah. Only at least two of them and maybe more wouldn’t be coming back. And the rest . . . well, they’d probably be worth inducting into the Order if the Great Old Ones rated them higher than sandwich-stock, but they’d be a right bitch to keep under control after they’d seen what happened to the others. They’d never go to the cops, of course – the cops would think they were crazy if they so much as hinted at what this place was like, let alone the Great Old Ones, and being accessories to murder,*

*however inadvertently and innocently, would help to keep their mouths shut. But even so* – he rubbed that spot on the back of his head, souvenir of an encounter with a hammer about a month ago, said tool having been wielded by one of his long-time subordinates who had wanted to advance in the Order via a quicker route than that of rising through the ranks as a result of hard study and harder work. He really was getting too old for this sort of thing. That contract . . . oh, *please* let the Great Old Ones agree to that contract . . .

Time passed. Daoloth chattered amiably at Reichert, to whom Reichert gave desultory, laconic answers from time to time just to show he was paying attention. Every so often, Reichert nervously glanced up at that weird sky. He remembered his first visit here, twelve years ago, an acolyte and applicant for admission to the Order himself, when Karl had been head of the Order's local chapter (*And where are you now, Karl? Still at the bottom of that settling pond over at Hanford Reservation, where the boys dumped you after we were through with you? Or floating around somewhere in the Aether with the Mi-Go or whatever they were. . . . Lucky thing I had the goods on Beitelmen then, so he'd make sure we got onto the land there without being busted by the guards and wouldn't turn us in himself. And that he ate the barrel of a gun two weeks later, after we showed him the rest of what we had on him*).

That sky . . . it was always the same, yet ever-changing, night sky filled with those whirling stars and comets with long, trailing tails and eye-hurting nebulae glowing like spin-offs from H-bomb blasts, all hurtling in all directions with no regard for anything approaching normal astronomical reality, and just the merest wisps of altocirrus clouds lending any hint of normalcy to it.

The light from the heavens was more than enough to illuminate everything here, often with eye-hurting clarity – sometimes far more than he liked. You could see everything here by it – sometimes too much. It was the sheer fucking *detail* that light picked out that got to him – like those gargoyles and other things with which the buildings in the square were decorated, even hundreds of yards away. Things no one should have to see . . . or remember. What could he see with the help of good, honest sunlight? He'd asked Nyarlathotep once, "Doesn't the Sun ever shine here?" The Great Old One had replied, "Oh, yes, our Day-Star does shed his radiance upon us on . . . the proper occasions. Pray you are never here when he does." It wasn't the words, but the *way* the Great Old One had said that that had sent chills racing up and down Reichert's spine – and strange pictures dancing through his mind, pictures that had eventually flowered in his dreams, making many of his nights something worse than Hell.

The light from the stars and the rest of that cosmic light-show above were bad enough. Sluicing down on this weird world like a rain of cold fire, it frosted every surface in a rime of hoarfrost mixed with salt and glowing slime. And between the pools and puddles and hills of cold light, the shadows were black as the Devil's heart, sharp-edged as razors, like shadows on the Moon were said to be.

God, it was cold, so *cold* . . .

And then the acolytes and their shepherding Great Old One were coming back out of the Lair of Fthaggua, and yes, six of them were missing this time (*well, that was six less of them he'd have to guard his back against, or put up with their wretched, puerile jokes and attempts to get on his good side*), and –

*Shit*. Bjorn and the three Great Old Ones he'd gone over to the Tcho-Tcho Cathedral with were coming back, too. Aw, dammitalltohell anyway! He had *so* hoped –

"Look!" Bjorn told him, grinning fatuously, the expression, if such were possible, making Bjorn even more hideous than usual. "They gave me this ring!" he said, holding out his left hand.

"Who did?" Reichert asked him, staring at the ring. Made of some bright, silvery metal – white gold? chrome-washed silver? Whatever it was, it shone bright and hard and as beautiful as the stars, the normal, healthy stars of Earth, not those sick multitudes filling the godawful skies of this place – within a ring of eight startlingly bright blue star sapphires, the ring was set with an emerald so large it couldn't have been real . . . could it? But it was so bright, its colors so pure . . . The emerald or whatever it was contained something, something purple-black. And moving. It looked – it looked like a . . . like an octopus, an octopus with enormous, cat-slitted yellow eyes. And it . . . it seemed to move, only slightly, but there was a real, noticeable motion to those arms, the tips gently curling around and out, around and out . . . It should have seemed small – the stone was a little over a centimeter across and half a centimeter deep, huge for an emerald, maybe too huge, but rather than seeming small, confined by the stone, the thing it contained seemed far away, as if he were seeing it through a powerful telescope rather than looking into the depths of a small chip of crystal . . . far enough that it had to be enormous.

Now he noticed that it had fangs, or chelicerae, or whatever you called the things that octopi or spiders ate with. Those great yellow eyes met his, bored into him like an auger, into his very soul, and it clashed those things where its mouth should be, and seemed to smile . . .

“You all right, Teach’?”

Shaking himself to clear his head – he felt dizzy, vertiginous – Reichert snarled, “Bjorn, how many times have I told you not to call me that?!” Then: “Excuse me, son, I’m . . . not feeling well. Sorry I snapped at you.” *Have to keep this guy on my side – the Old Ones like him! Jesus! I don’t dare make him my enemy, not now.*

“That’s okay – Teach’,” said Bjorn, his smile rich with bright malice, knowing exactly what the older man was thinking.

That was okay – for now. *Keep up the charade as long as possible, don’t let the others see that this guy is getting the upper hand.*

Bjorn seemed to agree. “Time to go back . . . sir?”

“Yeah. Time to . . . go back. Could you help me round up the others and get them ready to pass through the Portal . . . Kevin?”

“Sure!” Brightly, as if he were a college student with a crush on his teacher rather than the middle-aged bastard on a high-balling power trip he really was, Bjorn turned toward the returning group of acolytes (*less six! Less six, dear God, God I thought I didn’t believe in any more!*), calling out, “It’s time to go back! The Master wants us to line up again like we did coming in – Pete, you and Alice, you help me get the others in ranks, okay?”

Nodding sickly – whatever had happened to the missing ones in that building, it had to have been *bad* – Pete Johnson, a tall, gangly kid who was studying engineering at the University of Oregon at Salem, and Alice Beal, a pretty blond little sexpot who was seventeen, if a day, but had the soul of an old, very experienced madame with a taste for power of all kinds, majoring in Women’s Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle (and majoring in Dungeon Parties by night over on Seattle’s Capitol Hill district, which is where Reichert had first met her), turned to the others in the group, formerly twenty-five and now down to nineteen. “Okay, listen up,” said Alice to the group (her take-charge side only came out at night, but here it was always night, and if somebody had to be in charge, better it was her, because she was good at it). “Form up in two lines and get ready to go back through the Portal. Pete, you take half, I’ll take the rest. Okay, kids, come on, Anne, you go with Pete’s group, Jeannie, you come with me, Bob, you go with Pete, Jen, you come with me . . .”

When they had all returned through the portal, the grins (*even those Great Old Ones without mouths still managed to look as if they were grinning at the Earthlings. What the hell was going on in their minds? What were they up to?*) of the Great Old Ones following them all the way like birds of ill-omen, Reichert heaved a sigh of relief so deep it made his ribs hurt. Looking at Bjorn, who had, of his own volition, taken a station at the very end of the group, a sort of flesh-and-blood shield between the rest and anything the Great Old Ones might try to do to them (*but what would they do? They wanted the humans to come back again, didn’t they? After all, that was one source of the sacrifices they loved – and maybe an endless font of mirth for them, entertainment they couldn’t get any other way*), Reichert said, holding out a hand to Bjorn, “Thanks . . . Kevin. It really helped.”

“Glad to be of service,” Bjorn told him cheerfully, taking Reichert’s hand in his own clammy grip.

Stifling an urge to wipe his hand on his pants – was that grease on the bastard’s palm? Or something worse? – Reichert said, “It’s late. Can you take some of the others back to Seattle with you?”

“Sure. No problem – I brought the truck from the business, remember?”

“Ah, yes. Good. All right, I’ll take home any of those who didn’t come in their own vehicles in my station-wagon. I’ll give you a call when I know when we should get together again, probably a week or two from now.”

“Okay, that works for me, too,” said Bjorn.

So saying, Bjorn went back to the others gathered there under the clean Oregon skies to find out who needed a ride back to Seattle, while Reichert slumped against his station-wagon, infinitely glad to be away from the Other Side, trying not to think about the next time, trying not to think about having to put up with Bjorn the next time, trying not to think . . .

As that westering Scorpio Moon sank toward the horizon, Reichert, his hands gripping the wheel of his ancient Chevy wagon so tightly the marks would still be there when he woke up next morning, drove back

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toward Salem, trying hard not to listen to the five acolytes muttering among themselves in the back seats. A sixth, Patti Ross, had taken the passenger seat in front, but blessedly, so far she'd said nothing since getting into the car. Her mouth set in a grim line, her eyes fixed straight ahead in a thousand-yard stare, she was elsewhere, her mind still back at the Lair of Fthagua and whatever had gone on there.

*That wasn't his problem. His problem, he knew, was Bjorn. And whether he would survive whatever Bjorn must be planning to do to him . .*

## 2. Object Lesson

### From Book 1, Part 1 of *The Dragon at War*

When mad Kevin Bjorn and his army of conquest swept into Fresno, killing most of its citizens and enslaving the rest, Jaime Thurston and Alice Major, both of whom were at the time about 13 years old, and best friends since they had been in kindergarten together, managed to survive the carnage by virtue of hiding inside a storage-shed behind a derelict house a couple of blocks from their school. The local “haunted house,” nobody except for the occasional tramp had lived in it for at least 15 years, and though it had finally been condemned a couple of years ago by the Building & Safety Department of the City of Fresno, so far the city hadn’t made a move to tear it down. There it had stood, year after year, sad and desolate, looking about as empty as a house could look. When the battle started, both girls were fortunate enough to be just a couple of hundred yards away from the derelict – they’d been on their way over to the school to see what they might be able to scavenge from the place, maybe find somebody’s old sweatshirt or tennis in a cloakroom that had been abandoned when their owner left town along with his parents right after the War – and, reading each other’s minds, had run for that house as fast as they could go. It wasn’t the sort of place anyone would think people might live in or where things of value might be stored, and maybe whoever was coming into the city wouldn’t find them there.

Once the two of them were safe inside the house, where they couldn’t be seen from outside, Jaime had an even better idea. Both of them, like everyone else in the neighborhood, were familiar with the grounds on which the house, an ancient, two-story Victorian monstrosity, stood. The lot itself was about an acre in extent, and besides the house it contained several outbuildings, including storage sheds, a garage, and a small barn, all in pretty much the same condition as the house. “Let’s hide in that storage shed near the old apple tree,” said Jaime. “You know the one – there’s nothing in it, not even tools or anything, and if they check the house and see what it’s like, you know they aren’t going to waste their time looking into that shed!”

“But it’s so, like, *creepy* in there – cobwebs and maybe rats and who knows what else!”

“You want to stay here in this house and get caught? I don’t! Come on – bet I can beat you out there!”

Of course, it was still snowing that gruesome black snow, the way it had been since right after the War, when San Francisco and Portland and Seattle got nuked and Los Angeles burned down (they’d heard all about it over the battery-powered radios their parents had, and had wondered if Fresno would be the next to get pasted, but somehow it never had and then the War was over and they were all survivors). Inside that shed it was so cold that the girls’ lungs ached with every breath – but in some ways that was a plus, because it was probably the reason there were no rats or spiders or other icky things in there to bother them. The two girls huddled together in a corner, using their body-heat to try to stay warm, praying they wouldn’t be found by anyone until after whoever it was went away, and worrying about their parents, who would be wondering where they were.

After a day or so of hiding in the shed, freezing to death and so hungry they could have eaten a whole elephant each – raw – they emerged again. There was no one around. Hoping it was all over, they began trudging back toward their homes, which were only two houses apart, on the same street. But they’d only gotten as far as the school when someone yelled, “Stop, you!” They started to run – and bullets twanged off the blacktop by their feet.

Terrified, they came to a halt, waiting to see what would happen. Lights bobbed toward them – people carrying kerosene lanterns. Soon they found themselves surrounded by a group of bearded men, all dressed in camouflage fatigues under heavy winter coats, the sort that the local sporting-goods stores sold to those who were planning to go snowboarding or skiing, or that could be found in the military surplus stores just off the downtown area. All the men were heavily armed; most of them carried automatic rifles and wore smaller guns in hip- or shoulder-holsters.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a rough voice demanded.

“We . . . we were on our way home,” said Alice.

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“Well, you’re going to have a new home now,” the voice’s owner, a heavily muscled man about 6’ tall, told them. “You two, come with me.” Numbly, they followed him; other men closed in behind them.

Soon they were both inside the school’s gym. “This is where you’re gonna stay from now on, except when you’re at work,” the man told them. He was called Sergeant Forrest, Jim Forrest, and he told them he was part of Kevin Bjorn’s Army of Liberation, which was now in charge of the city.

Pallets were spread out on the floor; they’d be sleeping there tonight. At least it was warm in the gym, and they’d get fed – so far, so good. Then Forrest asked them, “You two live around here before?”

Numbly Jaime nodded her head.

“Where?”

They told him where their parents’ homes were located.

“Hmm . . . that isn’t far from here, maybe a block. And we just made a sweep there, so it’s secure. Okay, I’m gonna detail two men to go with you to pick up your stuff from there. You know, clothes and so on. You can’t take much, you’ll be keeping your stuff in one of the gym lockers, which won’t hold much, but a couple of changes of clothes and a paperback book or whatever wouldn’t be a problem.” He didn’t seem to be a really bad man. His voice was almost kind, and when he looked at them in the light inside the gym he seemed almost sad. “Here, Pete, Marion, you two come here, I need you to escort these young ladies over to their parents’ place so they can get some clothes, their toothbrushes, that sort of thing.”

“Want us to bring anything else back?” asked one of the men he’d delegated for the task.

“Look, asshole, don’t worry about it, okay? They’re going to do a sweep later on, round up everything worth taking that’s still in all these houses. Now you just run along, help these two get what they need, and come right back. Got me, Pete?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Pete, his voice sullen.

The first house they tried was Jaime’s. Silent, shrouded in black snow like all the other houses on the block, it had the aura of a man who’d just been kicked in the balls: staggering with pain, empty of anything but agony and nausea. Inside, no one was at home. The two men told the girls, “Look, you two bitches don’t try running away or anything, all right? We’re going to wait here in the kitchen – you get what you need and don’t try nothing or I’ll beat the shit out of you both, hear?”

They heard. While the two men rummaged through the kitchen, looking for booze (none; Jaime’s parents were Seventh-Day Adventists and didn’t drink), food (a plastic container of Medjool dates, a box of Ritz crackers, an unopened package of Cheddar cheese in the non-working refrigerator), cigarettes (none, for the same reason there was no booze), or anything else they could consume, Jaime and Alice went into Jaime’s bedroom. They had to pass Jaime’s parents’ bedroom and that of her older brother on the way; the brother had been away on a trip to Vale, Colorado, when the War broke out, and never did come home, but Jaime’s parents should still have been there – they were afraid to look into the parents’ bedroom, for fear they’d see bodies, and turned their heads away as they passed by its entrance. When they reached Jaime’s room, they were greeted by a small, hungry “*Mew!*”

“Snowball!” exclaimed Jaime. Then, her voice dropping to a whisper, she said, “Come here, baby, I’m here, it’s all right . . .” A kitten, its snow-white fur long as an Angora’s, stuck its head out of the closet. It ran toward her, frantically butting its face against her legs and then her face as she picked it up and hugged it close. “Here, sweetie, I’ve got a bag of your food in the closet, I’ll just put it in this suitcase, along with some other stuff, you can come with us,” said Jaime as she went to the closet and pulled out a bag of dried cat food and a suitcase. It didn’t take long to grab a couple of pairs of genes, some blouses, plenty of underwear, a washcloth, toothbrush, tube of toothpaste, and some paperback books and put them into the case along with the kitten, who, seeming to understand that something was terribly wrong with the world and that Jaime was trying to put it right, didn’t protest or struggle at all. Jaime had just got the suitcase closed when one of the men called from the hallway: “Hurry it up, you bitches! I’m freezin’ my ass out here! Let’s get a move on so we can get back to the gym where it’s *warm!*”

“Yes, sir, coming, sir!” Jaime yelled. “—Come on, Alice, let’s go so we can go to your house and get your things,” she said, taking the other girl by the hand as she headed for the kitchen.

Alice’s house was as deserted as Jaime’s – more, for there were no pets there. Alice’s last pet, or rather pets, had been an aquarium full of guppies and goldfish, which she’d given away to a friend down the street when she’d gotten bored with them. The family’s last dog had died of old age two years before, and they hadn’t gotten another since. So Alice only had to grab a suitcase, fill it with some clothing, her sketchbook,



her boxes of pastels and charcoals, a few pencils, a couple of paperback science fiction novels and a Harlequin Romance novel, and they were ready to go.

On the way back, they tried asking their escort what had happened to their parents; they were told to shut up and keep quiet or else. Neither girl wanted to push her luck, especially Jaime, who had her kitten to protect and who didn't want to take the slightest chance that Snowball would be discovered by these men, so they held their tongues all the way back to the barracks.

Once back at the barracks, they found that Sergeant Forrest was still there. After he had assigned them beds, right next to each other – he seemed to realize that they'd be much more cooperative if they had each other's company – and lockers for their possessions, Jaime asked him, "Um, I don't want to, like, make problems, but how can I find out what's happened to my parents and Alice's?"

Again his eyes filled with pity as he said, "They went through Selection yesterday with most of the people on your block."

"S-selection –?"

"Means they won't be coming back, sweetcheeks," said Pete, grinning nastily.

Forrest rounded on him. "What did I tell you about speaking out of turn, corporal?"

"Uh – uh – look, Jim, I mean, Sarge, I didn't mean nothin', honest, I'm sorry!" Pete whined, gone in an instant from swaggering bully to terrified subordinate.

"Yeah, right. You just – just get out of my sight, hear me? Go back to your own quarters. I'll have a talk with you later. Now go!"

Throwing Forrest a squeaky "Yessir!" and quick, sloppy salute, Pete scuttled away as fast as he could go. When he was gone, Forrest told the two girls, "Don't mind him. I don't know what happened to your parents, and he don't, either. If I hear anything, I'll let you know, okay?"

Both girls thanked him profusely. As he walked away, leaving them by their beds, Alice knew, with a sick certainty, that their parents were gone for good – that word "Selection" had a very ominous tinge to it. But there was always hope – always until there wasn't any more. So until she and Jaime heard more about it, she wouldn't give up the hope that their parents were around someplace and eventually they'd all get back together.

At first, the girls' new lives weren't so bad, even though their parents remained among the missing. They were assigned to work in the kitchen that had been set up in what had been an exercise room in the gym, and while the work was hard, there were a lot of survivors to do it, and it was almost always all done by time for the evening meal. The food wasn't bad, either – the men of Bjorn's Army of Liberation continued to bring in case after case of canned goods, bags of potatoes and other root vegetables, and anything else that might keep without refrigeration that had been 'salvaged' from all over the city. As far as meat went, they brought that in, too; the meat was kept in big bags outside, in the snow, where it froze solid and would keep perfectly as long as winter lasted or until it was brought in, thawed, and eaten, whichever came first. Some of their mates on the work-detail told them in low whispers, to avoid being overheard by any of soldiers who might come through, that the carcasses being brought in by the soldiers didn't look like beef or lamb – they looked like the bodies of horses, dogs, cats, hamsters, rats, all kinds of things, even zoo-animals such as bears or tigers or even komodo dragons, but not those of cattle, sheep, or pigs. Alice and Jaime both disregarded the rumors – what could they do about them even if they were true? They concentrated on their chores and then, when work was done and they were called to mess, they put everything of that sort out of their heads – that wasn't anything you wanted to think about at dinner!

At night, after Jaime had sneaked into the locker-room to let Snowball out of the suitcase so the kitten could go potty and have something to eat – that first night in the dorm Jaime'd punched some holes in the suitcase with an awl she'd found on the floor in the locker-room, dropped there and forgotten who knows when, so that Snowball could breathe – and sleep with Jaime during the night, she and Alice would lie awake for awhile in the dark, engaging in whispered conversation. Sometimes they talked about clothes, sometimes they giggled over which of their guards were the cutest and which were the ugliest, sometimes they shared old memories of their families and better times; by common, unspoken understanding they usually avoided talking about the invasion of Fresno by Bjorn's Army of Liberation and what had come after – you didn't want to go to sleep thinking about it, because if you did, you'd be likely to have nightmares. The dorm was warm and comfortable from all the Coleman lanterns and oil-lamps the soldiers had scavenged and set up there, the food was good, they could wear their own clothing, they even had Snowball with them. It could have been worse.

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A few days after the two girls had been captured by Forrest and his men, Bjorn, who up until then had been for them only a name without a face, paid a surprise visit to the dorms.

None of the slaves – for, it was clear, that was what the surviving citizens of Fresno had become, slaves of Bjorn and his Army of Liberation had any idea of just what to expect of Bjorn. Rumor had it that he was nine, or maybe three feet tall, and as wide as he was tall and skinny as a rail, handsome as a God and ugly as sin – and there was nothing to choose among the rumors, because that’s all they were, just talk. But now, the guards told them, they’d actually get to meet Bjorn, who was putting everything to right, creating a better world for them out of the ashes of the old one, needing their cooperation to do it. As the guards lined them up outside the dorms, under a watery Sun dimly seen through high clouds – the weather had eased off a bit, but God only knew how long it would be until it began snowing again – Alice and Jaime, who had carefully tucked Snowball back into the suitcase and put it away in the locker again, whispered questions among themselves and their neighbors. “Maybe, if he’s handsome, we can be his concubines,” whispered Jaime, who had read far too many True Romance type novels for her own good. “That way, we’d get all sorts of privileges! What do you think?”

“I think you’re full of it, dear, and besides, what if he’s as ugly as some of the stories have it? – Oh, quiet, here he comes . . .”

Marching toward them across the school’s athletic field, where the slaves had been lined up, was a procession consisting of about twenty soldier types in two columns, side by side, followed by a sort of marching band that probably included members of the school’s band who’d been dragooned for this purpose, playing out-of-tune versions of marches such as “Stars and Stripes Forever” and the much older “The World Turned Upside Down. Between the two columns of the soldiers marched a lone figure dressed in a trench coat, trousers, and boots. When the head of the column was about forty feet from the place where the ranked-up slaves were standing, somebody cried, “Halt! Ten-shun!” The soldiers instantly came to parade rest, as if they’d drilled for months doing it, the figure between their two columns halting with them. Behind them, a little raggedly, the band did the same. “Present *harms!* *Right face!* *Left face!* Present *harms!*” The soldiers went through the drill flawlessly, though a couple of them seemed almost embarrassed by it.

The soldier at the head of the leftmost column came forward. “His Excellency Kevin Bjorn, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Liberation and Conqueror of Fresno, California!” he cried.

At that, the lone man in the center stepped forward, a soldier on either side coming forward with him, as bodyguards, and approached the slaves.

“Oh, my God!” Alice squeaked involuntarily, her eyes going wide in horror.

“Oh, guh-ross!” said Jaime, fortunately somehow managing to keep her voice too low for a guard to hear.

The man who had come before them was something worse than any of the villains Jaime had ever seen in those vintage Batman comics her dad had kept, stored up there in the attic, worse even than the grody imps and devils in those paintings by that guy Hieronymus Bosch that she’d seen once in one of those coffee-table art books. A tall, gangly, scarecrow of a man, clean-shaven except for a pencil of a mustache on his upper lip that went up and down rather than side to side (didn’t she remember a teacher of hers, a Mrs. Goldstein, telling her something about a man like that, something about her grandparents dying in a place in Poland, named, like, Ostrich or something like that? wondered Alice), he was just about the ugliest thing either girl had ever seen even in nightmare. His skull was so warped and crushed out of true that it might have been stomped on by an elephant, and there was a furnace full of things neither of them wanted to think about behind his bulbous, bulging, pale blue eyes and weird smile. Tendrils of his long, thinning, age-grizzled hair, which was caught back in a yellow ribbon, whipped about the endlessly keening wind. Because of the frightful damage to his skull from whatever had staved it in, maybe years and years ago, one of his eyes was skewed almost to the side of his face, and lower than the other; his ragged, thin-lipped mouth, full of broken, rot-blackened teeth, was twisted over to the other side of his face; and his broken nose was bent far out of true, courtesy of one or more hard blows he had sustained somewhere in his past. He wore ragged, long, grey sideburns which still contained traces of light brown. He looked as if – at this thought, Alice had to work hard to suppress a fit of giggling born not of humor, but sheer horror – as if he’d gotten caught in the middle of an all-out war between Age and Youth, crushed between the two sides and then let fall onto the field as they disengaged again, somehow managing to survive. Nauseated, Alice noticed a thin trickle of drool ran from the corner of the man’s mouth to his chin – and was that a bubble of

snot sticking out of his nose? She shuddered, instinctively hoping that the line of slaves in front of her would hide her from the guards – so far, none of them had done anything mean to her, but you never knew.

Still wearing that bizarre grin, Bjorn whipped about so that he faced his soldiers and raised his right hand in a funny, stiff-armed salute. His soldiers did the same. “Heil Bjorn! *Sieg heil!*” they shouted. As Bjorn, nodding his head in satisfaction, turned back to face the slaves, the soldiers dropped their arms again. Now Jaime, who had excellent eyesight, could see that every one of them, like Bjorn, was wearing a red armband on his right arm, on which was a white circle outlined in black, in the center of which was a funny sort of cross all four arms of which were broken in the middle, the upper part of each arm flopping over so that the whole thing gave the effect of a wheel with four broken spokes turning to the left, the top parts of the spokes trailing in the wind behind the bottom parts.

Now Bjorn turned back toward them again. He never said anything to them, just looked them all over as if immensely pleased with himself. Finally, to Alice and Jaime’s overwhelming relief, he and his two bodyguards turned and went back to the procession, which then went marching back to wherever they’d come from – probably City Hall, said a guard later, though it was likely Bjorn would move from there soon to a bigger building, “One more defensible,” as the guard put it.

Finally the slaves were released to return to their duties. Grateful it was over, Jaime and Alice were more than happy to return to their work. They spent the rest of their day trying to forget the sight of that face, that horrible face. Unlike previous days, there was no temptation to talk about the experience – it only got in the way of putting it as far out of their minds as possible, so far they’d never be able to recall it again.

The days went by, and soon Alice and Jaime had put the incident behind them. The guards on their dorm weren’t particularly mean to them, and some were even rather kind. The two girls began to let their guard down again, and Jaime even brought Snowball out at times before bed to let the others they shared the dorm with play with the kitten.

Then, one night, about three weeks after that first glimpse those in the dorm had had of Bjorn, there was a surprise inspection.

It came on the heels of Jaime’s being busted in the locker-room one evening with Snowball by Terrence, one of the guards – Alice didn’t know him very well; she and Jaime had tried to avoid him, because, unlike some of the guards, he was always scowling, giving orders in a harsh whisper of a voice, sometimes hitting or kicking slaves, often for no reason at all – while Jaime, Alice, and two other slaves were playing with the kitten. The four of them were so absorbed by the kitten’s antics that they didn’t hear Terrence until he was right on top of them.

“You come with me!” Terrence growled, hauling Jaime to her feet from the floor, where she’d been sitting with the others and the kitten. “Mingo, you bring the fucking cat! Bill, you take this other bitch” – meaning Alice – “and her buddies, here! You others get the rest of these assholes out there, now!” he yelled at several other guards who had suddenly appeared there in the locker-room.

The next thing they knew, all the slaves in the dorm were being hustled outside, Jaime, Alice, and their two friends marched ahead of all the others by Terrence and the guards he’d assigned to escort them out. Most weren’t dressed for the frigid weather – it was late in the evening, filthy dark-brown snow was falling, piling up in dark drifts against the gym and on the athletic field to which they were being herded by their guards, and it was cold, colder than Alice had ever known here in Fresno even in winter. Because of the warmth of the gym, many of the slaves were wearing only T-shirts and shorts and tennis-shoes, while others, who had been getting ready for bed, Alice and Jaime among them, had on only thin nightgowns or pajamas and the flimsiest of bedroom slippers. Standing in that nasty, somehow greasy snow, in a bitter wind that had come up, Jaime and Alice, like most of the other slaves, were soon shivering hard, their arms wrapped tight about their bodies for the tiny bit of warmth it might give, their teeth chattering uncontrollably. Fresno rarely had snow; for the first time, seeing that weird summer snow, so dark under the stars and the makeshift torches that many of the guards were holding, Alice suddenly knew that things were far, far worse than she and Jaime had dreamed they could be.

The shuffling of feet and rustling whispers among the slaves fell away. Silence fell over the area like a pall. In the silence the slaves became aware that someone was standing before them – it was almost as if he’d materialized out of nothingness, right there in the snow. It was Bjorn, and ranked columns of his soldiers stood behind him. The two soldiers at the forefront carried flags which had that funny symbol of the broken-armed cross on them.

What seemed to be an eternity went by, the silence so thick Alice felt as if she were being smothered by it. Finally Bjorn, gesturing to the guard who held Jaime by the arm, said, “Bring the bitch here.”

When Jaime stood before him, her knees trembling more from terror than the bone-cutting cold, not daring to speak, Bjorn gestured to two other guards. In eerie, dead silence, one of them brought Snowball forward, and set it on the ground. Before the bewildered kitten could sense the danger it was in and try to flee, the second guard came forward, holding an urn filled with steaming liquid, its fragrance announcing that it was strong, boiling-hot black coffee. Without hesitation the guard upended the urn over the kitten, showering Snowball with scalding hot coffee.

Screaming in agony, Snowball finally tried to run, but had only barely raised a paw to do so when still another guard grabbed and held her, immobile, there before Bjorn.

“My kitten!” screamed Jaime, still not really sure this was happening. “She’s hurt! She’s –”

“She won’t hurt after *this*,” Bjorn said, wearing a sickening smirk. Now he brought his hand out from behind his back; it was holding a jerrycan full of gasoline. While one guard held the struggling, whimpering kitten, and two others held the kicking, screaming Jaime, who tried to bite them but only had her teeth loosened by several swift punches for her pains, Bjorn turned the jerrycan up and emptied its contents onto the ground before the kitten.

“Put the fucking thing in there,” Bjorn said to the guard who held Snowball, who obediently dropped the kitten into the puddle of gas, then jumped back. An instant later, Bjorn, who had whipped out a lighter from a breast-pocket of his trench coat, flicked it on and threw it into the puddle, jumping far back as he did so. Moments later, Snowball’s screams were extinguished as flames filled her lungs, searing them and cutting off her oxygen. It didn’t take long after that for Snowball to be reduced to a charred black lump of coals and ash that Jaime, now silent and wide-eyed with shock, tears streaming down her face, couldn’t recognize as her kitten or, indeed, anything that had once been a living, vital creature of any kind.

“What was its name, bitch?” Bjorn asked Jaime.

“S-Snowball,” she said, getting out the words with tremendous difficulty.

“Looks like a *coal*-ball to me!” Bjorn told her, giggling like a lunatic – or maybe something worse. He gestured again at the guard holding Jaime. The guard whipped out his semiauto, jammed it against Alice’s right temple, and pulled the trigger.

“You assholes understand now what happens to anyone who disobeys my orders?” Bjorn screamed at the assembled slaves. “I said ‘No pets or contraband in the barracks,’ and I meant ‘No pets or contraband in the barracks!’ Anybody who disobeys me again will join Snowball and the bitch, here,” he told them. Then, his soldiers coming forward, surrounding him, a protective shield, he turned and stalked away.

Alice and her surviving barracks-mates were kept waiting out in the snow for another half hour, shivering in their inadequate clothing, staring at the pale body of the girl, blood and brains leaking from her skull, staining the filthy snow with dark crimson, sprawled next to a charred black lump that had once been a lovely white kitten, torchlight and starlight painting everything in nightmare hues. For some reason she didn’t understand, her mind kept returning to the thin, pale-blue robe Jaime had put on over her cotton pajamas, which, splayed about her body and rucked up so that it only covered her torso from the waist up, had a shape like angels’ wings. Let it be an omen, oh please! Alice prayed, hoping that Jaime and her kitten had both gone to a place where no one would ever hurt them again, and what had just happened here would be erased as if it had never been for them.

While Alice waited to go back inside, in the safety of her own mind she reviewed everything any of them had been told by Bjorn and the guards in the last few weeks since the invasion and their enslavement. She was certain none of them had said a thing about contraband – nor, for that matter, pets. Slowly the realization came to her through the numbness clutching her heart that they were all now in the hands of lunatics and monsters, and God help them all – no one else could.

Another thought, hard on the heels of that one, was somehow even worse: there had to be a spy – or a renegade – in the barracks. How else could Bjorn have known to have that boiling coffee ready, and to carry that can of gas with him when he came out here?

Finally the guards told them they could go back inside the gym again. When they got back to their barracks they found that their lockers had all been opened, and everything except at most a change or two of clothing had been taken. Some of the slaves didn’t even have that much left to them. The photo of Alice’s family, her 6<sup>th</sup>-grade yearbook, her bras and panties, her treasured paperback copies of C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, her pencils and notebook – it was all gone. All of it, save for a tattered T-shirt, her last

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pair of jeans, and one zori, its toe-strap broken and hanging free on one side like the tongue of an old, very weary dog.

### 3. Bad Day Comin’

#### From Volume 2, Book 3 of *Dragon Drive*

**2039 – Diablo Keep, Los Angeles County, California:** *Having taken Paul Royer under his long arm, Monty Eisenstein began teaching Paul the secrets of guerrilla warfare by taking him out one moonless night to hunt down some bandits. The two men, one very young, just 15, in spite of his 6’ 2” of height, thick pelt of hair on chest, arms, legs, and back, and heavy muscles, the other in the prime of his life and much taller than his companion, headed out into the desert near the Keep dressed in black ponchos to cut the wind and make them blend in more, their faces covered in petroleum jelly mixed with soot, other darkeners, and compounds to keep the soot from harming the skin, silently stalking the bandits. Sprawled out on the far side of a dune, they willed themselves to be nothing but ears and noses to pick up every trace of speech, every smell coming from the bandits.*

Then: Monty hissed, then said to Paul in a prison-yard whisper, “Get ready.”

“Why?”

Monty jabs Paul in the biceps, a silent signal to keep quiet. “When I say ‘now,’ do what I do.”

Tensing his body, a huge, lion-like man getting ready to take prey, hissing “Now!”, Monty leaped over the dune, drawing his bayonet in one hand, pulling out his Uzi in another, taking aim as he darted toward the bandits. Paul was right on his heels, his own weapons drawn. The two of them were on the bandits before the bandits knew what had hit them, taking them out with lightning speed – except for one, whom Monty, whispering, told Paul to spare. “I want him to spread the word – it’s not good business to come prowlin’ around our Keep . . . an’ your doctor won’t love you for it if you do.”

They left the bodies for the scavengers, and the lone bandit to try to make his way, bleeding heavily, back to his camp – if he could.

As Monty and Paul scrambled back down the side of the same dune they’d used for cover just before rushing the group of bandits, Paul started to swing the crude but effective short-sword he’d made under Monty’s tutelage a few weeks before at an Elemental Widow (this one, with the overlapping double upright red triangles on her belly signifying her dominion by Fire – her venom killed anything quickly, even a grown man, unfortunate enough to be without the antivenin, burning its way through one’s biochemistry like fire driven by a high wind through a manzanita forest – was stalking a gigantic mutant mosquito. The mosquito, which almost certainly carried at least one of the terrible new malarial parasites, was likewise a mutant.

“No, Paul,” Monty said, bringing his arm down to block the swing.

“Why the fuck not? She’s *poisonous*, Monty!”

“That mosquito she’s on is worse. *Much* worse. Poison don’t breed – malaria parasites *do*, an’ so do mosquitoes. An’ we’re low on chloroquine right now. That lady spider an’ her sisters are the best defense we have against the bastard mosquitoes, an’ will be for a long, long time. That makes her and her people *our* sisters – they’re doin’ somethin’ we desperately need done, which is holdin’ down the numbers of these Beelzebubs,” he said in that low, dark voice of his that heralded the emergence of his night side, his dark side, harnessed in the service of Life and therefore far more terrifying than the anger he sometimes showed in daylight, chuckling softly to underscore the menace.

“‘Beelze-’ –”

“A Beelzebug is somethin’ gets into yer room at 3 in the mornin’ an’ *cannot* be cast out, leastways not without dynamite and mebbe a ton o’ garlic an’ silver.”

“Haha.”

“You watch – take that tone with a Beelzebug an’ you’ll get bit by one for sure. It’ll turn *you* into a Beelzebug!” Another indigo-black chuckle.

“Yeah, right.” Paul strained to raise that sword in preparation for dispatching the Fire Widow to the Promised Land, Happy Hunting Ground, or whatever passes for Arachnid Heaven – but Monty’s arm was immobile, the Rock of Gibraltar. “What the fuck *are* you, man?” Paul whispered to his mentor.

“Alive. An’ I plan on *stayin’* that way for a long, long time – by doin’ ever’tthin’ possible to protect our best allies against disease-carriers of all kinds from misplaced enthusiasm on the part of young warriors and well-meanin’ idjits. You need her out here, carryin’ out her life-work, goin’ about her True Will competently an’ honestly an’ with ever’tthin’ she’s got. You need her sisters, an’ her aunts an’ uncles an’ cousins out to

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a thousand degrees of removal, ever' spider alive now on our world. Long as you don't go stickin' a finger near her – an' mebbe even if'n you do, the Widders'r slow to bite us, too canny to be provoked into bitin' somethin' as much bigger'n they are as us unless they absolutely *have* to – she won't hurt you, anyways. Don't kill what you don't have to, especially when it's somebody doin' us all a great deal o' good.”

“If you say so, man,” Paul said, sighing in disgust, resheathing his short-sword – no, Bowie Knife, Monty called it.

“I do, son, that I do,” Monty said, and something dark and hard and dry began to fill his voice. “Now let's git back an' tell Big Bill how the wind lies – that group of assholes we just took out were talkin' like kids on school-break on a nice, bright day in June on the beaches o' South Florida, chatter, chatter, chatter. Some wonderful intelligence – an' they was too stupid to think somebody else could mebbe put that intelligence to use against 'em.”

“What kind of intelligence?” Paul asked him as the two men, following the dune crests all of which Monty's eidetic memory had noted and stored in his fantastic mind, projected onto a three-dimensional mental curve which, like Ariadne's yarn, would take them straight back to the Keep without a hitch.

“These wasn't the usual sad bunch desperate for medicines an' guns an' the other necessities o' survival, Paul. Didn't you catch it?”

“I . . . think so. They get their goodies from somebody named 'Bjorn'? 'Baron' Bjorn?” Light dawned. “They came down here from . . . *Fresno*?” Paul said, disbelieving the testimony of his own ears. Fresno was what, 150, 200 miles northeast of the Keep? Why would anyone from *there* have come all that way down here, on *foot*, yet (maybe they'd had horses and the horses died?), daring this vast desert region, dry as a bone in Hell's basement, poisonous and hot as the Devil's farts? What were they hoping to find here?

“They was lookin' for intelligence, Paul, *military* intelligence,” Monty said, reading Paul's mind with perfect accuracy and total comprehension in that weird way he had. “See those lights up there?” Monty said, gesturing with his bayonet toward the top floors of the Keep, which they were now approaching. That bayonet – a Roman officer of the Old Empire would have sold his soul for a sword like that, for that is what the bayonet was: a medium-length, titanium-steel short-sword whose edges had been kept razor-sharp by constant honing and polishing over the last 17 years or more by a man who knew that the condition of his weapons was one of the most accurate predictors of his life-expectancy, no, *the* most accurate of actuarial indicators. “Those lights up at the top o' the Keep? Well, somebody to the northeast of us wants to put those lights out – permanently.”

Paul stared at him as if Monty had suddenly gone mad, but refrained from comment.

“Bill's gonna *love* this,” Monty grumbled as they began the trek down the face of the last dune before the entrance to the canyon which gave access to the Keep. “So's Admiral Resh, not to mention the Governor. Fresno's aimin' at bigger things. Right now, they're just piss-ants studyin' to be bigger piss-ants, but in a few years, they're gonna be *real* problems, way beyond the piss-ant stage an' all the way into mad-dog country.”

“Monty, you know something about that place, about Fresno, don't you?”

“Yah, I do. I – there was a woman I found out here once. She escaped from Fresno after her husband an' daughter was tortured to death by the guy who runs the place, this Bjorn character. She got outta there with a backpack full o' CDs an' what turned out to be DVDs, which we can read usin' that old Doorways 3.1 software m' buddy the Wall give us. This Bjorn – seems he's an occultist.” Pulling gently at the ski-mask he wore to protect his face from the wind in order to make it sit better on his face, adjusting the night-vision goggles that covered his tender eyes, protecting them from the sand in that wind as well as enabling him to see at night, he said, “The kind of occultist stupid enough to deal with what he believes are demons – makin' deals that involve sacrifices o' livin' human beings in agonizin' ways, an' sometimes deals that require takin' out whole communities to offer in sacrifice. The benefits he's supposed to get are things like eternal life, ability to regenerate from lethal wounds, infinite wealth, power undreamed, all that happy horseshit. Never mind that Devil's bargains *always* backfire, turn into great big greasy lumps o' shit the moment the mornin' Sun pokes His blazin' head over the horizon to start the day. From what those idjits there on the other side o' that dune were sayin' afore we busted up their party, this Bjorn is a Nazi buff – one that worships the same diabolical bein's Hitler an' Al Qaeda did, or believes he does. An' practices murder as part o' keepin' 'em happy.”

“Shit! How can anybody be crazy enough to –” Then Paul remembered. “Is it really true, Monty?”

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“It’s happened again and again down the ages. Sometimes one o’ those self-taught, back-door sorcerers actually turns out to have some genuine Magickal talent. Hitler was said to be one such. So was Osama bin Laden. That those two – an’ no doubt Bjorn – was just itty-bitty kids playin’ with cosmic blastin’ caps don’t change the fact that the blastin’ caps was there . . . an’ went off in a series o’ conflagrations rangin’ from World War 2, includin’ all four fronts, through the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, an’ the Two-Day War. You never know, do you?”

“ ‘All four fronts’?”

“Yeah. The Eastern Front, against the Soviets; the Western Front, against the Western Allies; the War Against the Jews an’ the Holocaust; an’ the War Against Reality, against ‘Jewish Physics’ an’ I don’t know what all other lunacy.”

“Oh. – But you’re a Magickian, too, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am. But I’m a Magickian who believes, *knows* that murder is purely evil, especially murder of innocents, the helpless, those who don’t deserve such ghastly deaths. Murderin’ whole communities, like Diablo Keep – that’s what those assholes we were listenin’ to earlier was talkin’ over, you know – is even worse, for it murders the very thing that keeps its members alive. And the murder o’ whole worlds – you don’t even want to *think* about that . . .”

And so they continued on into Diablo canyon, and down the canyon to the Keep’s front door. As they entered the Keep and headed for Bill’s office – he’d be up late this night, waiting for Monty’s report – Paul thought, “*An’ the murder o’ whole worlds – you don’t even want to think about that . . .*” *What the fuck is going on out there? What’s happening to my world? Is Monty crazy? Or . . . am I just uninformed? Was that what all that jibber-jabber out there on the other side of that dune, part in English, part in Spanish, part in some weird language I never even heard before tonight, was all about?*

“That’s the language o’ the Old Ones,” Monty told Paul as he stopped before Bill’s office door and knocked softly on the frosted glass pane set into it.

“Come in, son, come in,” came Bill’s low, husky voice from within. The deadlock, activated by Bill from somewhere inside, *snicked* back. Monty and his shadow entered.

“What’cha got for me, Monty?” said the man within seated at the desk, his dusty-dark hands tapping the pages from a print-out with one sharp rap on the desk so that all their edges lined up, seemingly without effort or concentration.

“War’s comin’, Bill. Not today, not tomorrow, prob’ly not in the next five years. But after that . . . after that it’ll be more an’ more likely. You okay with the improvements in Keep defenses I want to have done?”

“Depends. What’d you find out?” said Bill. Now in his 60s, a time when most men that age grew older and rickettier with every year that passed, Bill was in top condition – he trained for at least an hour almost every other day in the Keep dojo, going one-on-one with the *sensei*, Andy Thorsson, and trained mentally for at least two hours every single day, one hour reading either his beloved science-fiction or aging articles on systems science from a wealth of archived scientific journals – and another hour his copy of the Bible, Old Testament and New. Paul couldn’t understand how such a cool old guy would read the Bible – except Monty read the Bible, too, mostly the Old Testament, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and stuff St. Francis d’Assisi wrote, like his “Canticle of the Sun” and his Rules, and more stuff by somebody named Moische Maimonides, Monty said it was his *Guide for the Perplexed*, over and over and over, on top of all those science books and articles and the sort of science fiction Bill liked so much, would you believe! Maybe . . . maybe they *knew* something. Maybe . . . maybe someday he’d try reading all that stuff himself.

But for now, he was still learning the ropes of how to be a night-fighter, a guerilla warrior, a Californio nightwalker ninja, and that took up most of Paul’s time . . . and his ability to be amazed at anything. This shit really *works*! And *he’s learning* it!

Paul imagined working his moves right in the face of this mystery man, Baron Bjorn of Fresno. Pow! Zing! Slice-and-dice! And then he looked up, and saw Monty and Bill both wearing that awful thousand-yard stare, like they’d both just looked through Hell’s main doors and seen everything that went on in there . . . Did he *really* want all that, that burden of responsibility the two older men carried?

Yeah, he did, it was the only way now not to lose Monty. Monty meant life itself to Paul – no, more, Paul’s very hope of heaven. If he lost Monty . . .

He wouldn’t. He would *not*. Slumping in the chair Bill had gestured for him to take as he talked to Monty, Paul swore to himself, *I won’t fail. I will not fail! Whatever it takes . . . whatever it takes . . .*



## 19. Hiroshima 93: On the Other Side of Morning

### A Hymn to Tomorrow

Dedicated to R. R. McCammon, author of *Swan Song* (1987), and to  
Alfred Bester, author of *The Stars My Destination* (1956)

My soul hovers there,  
High in the charred,  
Star-baked sky:  
I am one with the morning,  
I command the morning,  
Riding a blazing steed of Heaven  
Onward to the Stars:  
I am become Vishnu,  
Preserver of Worlds.

## 20. “All Things Bright and Beautiful . . .”

### An Interlude from *Club Vesta*

*And then he said: “Now it is time to quit  
this edge of shade: follow close after me  
along the rill, and do not stray from it;*

*for the unburning margins form a lane,  
and by them we may cross the burning plain.”*

– Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno Canto XIV: 133-137\**

A lingering stench of charred hair, flesh, and bone, baked feces and boiled urine still haunted the air as we made our way down the seemingly endless passage leading from Round 2 to Round 3. Carefully we picked our way through the rubble copiously littering the floor of the “temporarily” damaged passageway, with only the lich-light and cold-fire of the slimes and other microlife colonies that covered the walls in most places to light our way. As we went, our boots clogged loudly on the relatively undamaged sections of the passageway’s concrete flooring – or clicked in prim, sardonic disapproval whenever we had to make our way across areas liberally strewn with large and small chunks of the erstwhile ceiling, thickly blanketed with a fine, limy residue of concrete, a maddeningly pervasive, calcined analogue of jeweler’s rouge that drew all the moisture from anything it touched and irritated the hell out of eyes, throats, and sinuses – probably the reason that the walls and floor seemed almost dry, in spite of the abundant mosses, fungi, lichens, and less identifiable things growing luxuriantly everywhere save on some areas of the floor. Our boots were now mostly gray-white from the powdery stuff, instead of their normal shining black. Our faces and hands were covered with it, as well; judging from the way Lu’ looked, the two of us together must’ve looked like Pierette and Pierette, going up and down in the Earth and to and fro in it, searching for Pierrot. Our eyes itched and burned, our noses ran. Doubled over again and again by coughing-fits, and plagued with endless bursts of sinus-scalding sneezes, we got no relief at all from swigs of Gatorade from our canteens, and soon gave up trying, in order to conserve rations until we could replenish our supplies once again at the next commissary. We would have turned the air the color of a thermonuclear fireball with our curses at the horrible stuff – but it hurt too much to talk much, let alone luxuriate in cutting loose with the rich, rolling bursts of utterly blasphemous billingsgate the crap truly deserved. So we trudged on and on in near-silence. Fortunately, the light was adequate for us, in spite of its unlikely sources – otherwise we couldn’t have gone any distance at all. (I’d have to remember to make a really nice offering to the Slime-Gods, next Slimeday – if not for the lichens and other protistan light-makers covering the bare concrete walls throughout this passageway, we’d never have been able to make our getaway from Parlor One, and would probably have been dogmeat ourselves right now. Charcoal-broiled. Without benefit of prior euthenizing.)

“Christ, you’d think they’d keep the place fixed up!” Lu’ abruptly snarled, after tripping over yet another chunk of fallen debris and only narrowly avoiding gashing herself badly on a viciously sharp curbed shard of glass, probably from a busted bottle, that had somehow come to rest there, in the bargain. I was really worried, now. She must have been even wearier than she looked – Lu’ simply did not stumble over things. Having long ago learned to maintain a constant awareness of her surroundings, a result of her lifelong training in combat arts and woodcraft, normally she made cats look clumsy by comparison, and was never caught by surprise by anything. She had to be reeling with fatigue and hunger to lose her preternatural grace and agility this way. She must be within an ace of dropping from exhaustion.

“Lu’, stop.” Coming to a halt myself, I called out to her as she started to pick her way through the next pile of crapolith.

Halting jerkily in mid-step, almost tripping in the process, she turned to me, exhaustion written in every line of face and body, eyes glaring like lava-pits. “What the fuck is it now, Esh?”

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“Darlin’, you look like death warmed over!”

“That’s . . . appropriate. I *feel* like death warmed over. Char-broiled, even.”

“When did you last eat?”

“Eat?”

“You know, the stuff you put into the middle of your face and – Come on, Lu’, they provisioned us real well up there in Parlor 1, just before the big gut-blowout up there!”

“So?”

“So have you had anything to eat since we left there?”

“Uh . . .” She looked blank.

“I didn’t think so. So you can’t have eaten for – what? Fourteen, sixteen hours?”

“Jesus, Esh’, who the fuck do you think you are – my mother?”

“Sometimes I wish I were, Lu’ – maybe you’d listen to me when – hey!” I raced forward, just barely managed to catch her in time as the energy suddenly drained out of her legs and she began to slump to the ground.

Carefully I helped her to lie down on the floor so that she was lying face-down, with her pack upward and canteen to the side, where I could get at them. After taking off my own backpack and frame with some difficulty, without Lu’ to help me get at the buckles at the sides near the back, I tackled hers. Working open the straps of her aluminum-frame pack, I pulled it off her body and laid it on the floor, where I opened it and began hunting through it for the carefully-wrapped packs of trail-rations they’d given us back there at the commissary in the Parlor of Sacrifices to Vesta. I took several out, then unhooked her canteen from her belt. Sitting down beside her on the floor, I got her to roll over onto her back, sit up a little, then lie back down so that her head was in my lap. She collapsed there gratefully with a sigh of utter exhaustion.

“You dumbshit,” I chided her gently. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you out without a keeper! – Here.” Unscrewing the cap of her canteen, holding it in my right hand, with my left under her shoulders I helped her to rise up a little and held the canteen for her so she could drink from it. Gratefully, only half-conscious, she began to slurp down the Gatorade with almost frightening thirst. “Ah – no you don’t! Not too much, dammit, you’ll throw it all back up again!” I pulled it away.

Making a sharp mew of protest, she tried weakly to grab the canteen, a completely ineffective effort that left her drained. Her head and hand fell back weakly, and she groaned.

I let her down gently again. Carefully re-capping the canteen and laying it aside for the moment after making sure it didn’t leak, I asked her, “You mean to tell me, dip, that all you’ve had for the last fourteen hours or so is speed and acid?”

“Uh – c-can’t r-r’member . . .”

“Oh, *nice*.” Sighing in an exasperation that was only a shield from the burgeoning terror for her I didn’t dare give in to, yet, I began hunting around again through her pack, rummaging among the sex-toys, boxes of ammunition, wads of dirty laundry, carefully-folded clean spare clothing, and jumbled books and magazines for the baggie full of individually sealed packets of daily megavitamin/mineral nutritional supplements which, like me, she always kept with her. “Okay, I’m going to give you your vitamins – maybe a couple of the packets – and some SuperGator’ to wash them down. Then I’ll feed you some fruit-bars or something – and don’t you dare tell me ‘no,’ idiot!” I snapped as she tried to raise her hands in protest, waving them weakly in the ghost of a warding motion. “I – what’d you say?” I leaned down, trying to hear her better. Her voice was a scratchy revenant of her usual rich contralto.

“D-don’ want . . .”

“Tuff shit. You’ll have. Don’t want you dyin’ on me, not now, babe . . .” Tearing open a packet of nutritional supplements with my teeth, re-opening her canteen, I began pushing pills at her. “No - swallow the fuckers, dammit, or I’ll force-feed them to you! – That’s right . . . Now, a sip of SuperGator’ . . . now the next one . . . that’s right . . . good girl . . .”

One at a time, somehow I got them all into her, along with more of the hi-test, vitamin-injected Gatorade we’d gotten back at one of Level 2’s commissaries. SuperGator’ was a mega-vitamin/mineral/amino acid-enriched version of the original Gatorade, a soft drink originally made for athletes, composed of salted lemon/limeade with a little added vitamin C, to replenish vitamins and electrolytes after sustained, all-out effort and get them into the blood stream and up to the brain long before anything solid could have been assimilated. Lu’s poor, starved brain needed those nutrients now, and SuperGator’ was tailor-made for getting them to it fast.

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After taking the last capsule and swallowing it down, she lay back down again.

“Hey! Don’t you dare go to sleep on me yet – you’re gonna get a couple of these fruit-bars and maybe a Tiger’s Milk bar into you first, before you nod out.”

“Mmff . . .”

“Oh, shut up. – Here.”

I had brushed the flour-like dust from her face with a clean handkerchief from her pack. The color was very gradually returning to her lips and cheeks, which had been a frightening chalky green. She wasn’t protesting very strongly now, as I got the trail-food bars into her – her body was finally beginning to cooperate in getting its needs met, now that lack of essential electrolytes was no longer screwing up her limbic brain’s survival circuits.

Finally, after she’d managed to get down three small bars of the rich trail-food, and showed no signs of incipient nausea for at least three or four minutes, I began to relax, no longer afraid she might die of shock, exhaustion, or accidental strangulation on vomitus due to regurgitating too-quickly eaten food and drink. “You want more, Lu’?”

“Uh . . . no.” Her voice was finally returning to something like normal from that terrifying faint, scratchy husking whisper. I dared to relax a little more. I’d never thought, until now, that that voice could ever seem so dear, so precious.

“You want some rest?”

“Uh – yeah. Need . . . sleep.” Before I could respond, her head dropped to the side, her eyelids dropped leadenly, and within instants she slid without resistance into the moveless sleep of the utterly exhausted.

I looked down at that still, ghost-pale face, seeing the long, heavy, startlingly golden fringe of her eyelashes trembling visibly with the rhythm of her still slamming pulse. What if that pulse ever, finally, came to rest? What would I do then? With it, the heartbeat of my whole world would have gone out.

Suddenly remembering what the two of us had been participants of just a few hours ago – hell, all we’d done and witnessed since we’d entered Level 7, in the previous two Rounds – I cringed, shuddering as images of mutilation, torture, and death in a thousand unspeakable ways rose up, unbidden, before me, the victims memorialized in those memories relentlessly transmuting themselves into Lu’, again and again and again, and then the bone-chilling memory of Lu’, stripped naked and bound with chains by the lunatics in the last round, her breasts and loins covered with napalm ready to be set afire, one of those crazed women holding a lighter with which she was just about to – oh, God, oh, God, oh God . . .

Relentlessly the images mobbed my soul like basilisks harassing a dragon, shredding my heart with vision upon vision of Lu’ raped, Lu’ mutilated and maimed, Lu’ gashed with razors, drilled with awls, burned with blow-torches and electric grills, Lu’ blinded, Lu’ with her tongue cut out, Lu’ crucified, Lu’ burned alive . . .

Somehow I finally shut off the horror-show before I went mad with it. Moving very carefully, in order to avoid waking her, I leaned forward and briefly, barely touched my lips to her forehead. She tasted of lime-y dust, salt, grime, sweat. Her odor came clearly to me, as close as I was to her; she stank of old sweat and unwashed flesh – but underneath that was a delicate hint of rose, sandalwood, estrogens, the harps of Heaven half-heard through chinks in the walls of Hell. With infinite care I reached out and brushed a lock of her wildly unruly hair away from her forehead.

– Oh, shit, she was still wearing her belt and boots – not to mention her s.o.b. holster, side-holsters, underarm holsters and the armory with which she kept them filled, or her boot-knives, or . . . Oh, fuck it. I wasn’t about to risk waking her up at this point, to get them off. Obviously, for now, anyway, she wasn’t at all bothered by them. Let her sleep.

I did get both our blankets out of our packs. Draping one over her and putting the other around my shoulders, I settled back against the wall, prepared to wait it out until she awoke again . . .

\* \* \*

“Hey, sleepyhead – wake up!”

“Hanh?” I was lying on the floor, my blanket over me, covering me to my breasts, my boots standing on the floor neatly beside me, side by side, along with my belt and guns. Lu’ stood over me, grinning affectionately. “I thought you could use some beauty-sleep, dear, while I did breakfast for us . . . but I can

see it's hopeless, you'll never be any better-lookin', so why don't you get up and have something to eat now?"

"Uh – yeah, sure, okay . . ." Slowly, I somehow levered myself to a sitting position, blinking strychnine-curdled sleep out of my eyes. "You – I thought you were . . . Uh, you got me undressed. How?"

"I woke up and found myself lying there on the floor with my head in your lap. You were out like a light against the wall. I have no idea how long I was out of it – or you, either, for that matter. But by that point I don't think anything short of World War III would have waked you up, anyway. So after I got my own boots off and all, I took yours off, along with your guns and all, laid you down here, and then went back to sleep myself. I woke up maybe an hour ago – I needed to pee so bad I thought my bladder'd burst!" she laughed.

"Speaking of which," I said, come more fully awake, starting to get my boots and gear on, "where –"

Still laughing, she pointed down the passage. "If we'd gone just a little farther on, we'd have been home free, and we could've slept in real beds instead of on all this crap here!" She toed a small chunk of concrete on the floor at her feet, for emphasis. "Parlor Two of this Round's down there maybe 300 feet, or less, just around that bend in the passage." Shaking her head ruefully at the way we'd just missed finding Parlor Two and the comforts of home before camping here, she added, "The restroom's right off the corridor, just before you reach the door of Parlor Two."

"Guh-roovy! Be right back, babe –" Saying which, I made a mighty heave, surged to my feet, and began racing my bladder down the passageway toward the head. She watched me fondly as I charged down the passageway, around the bend – and there, right ahead of me, sure enough, was a gigantic door, a sign on it proclaiming, "Parlor Two: Universal Expressions of Vesta." The door, which was enormous, fifteen feet high by twenty feet wide, was completely covered with a bronze frieze comprising countless beings, human and non-human, animal and plant, terrestrial and utterly alien, even things possible only in myth, legend, and pure fantasy, interlocked and interconnected in equally countless varieties of sexual acrobatics and acts of love.

At another time, I'd have found that door utterly fascinating, and could have spent hours, days, years poring over it with a looking-glass, or maybe even an electron microscope, it was that richly, complexly detailed. The door was an erotic version, done in metal, of those wonderful ivory worlds-within-worlds-within-worlds for which master artisans of the Far East are renowned, like the ones Lu' and I had oohed! and aahhed! over for hours while touring the shops in the Bay Area's China Town that time. If whatever genius or geniuses had created this metallic miracle had had access to modern microtechnology, I could well believe that the impossibly rich detail-work of the frieze was fractal, repeated ad infinitum on ever-dwindling scales, right down to the molecular, even the atomic level . . .

But at the moment I had a problem: to wit, a quantity of urine that felt like it could have easily overflowed the bed of Lake Michigan, somehow packed into a one-quart bladder. Desperately, I cast about for the door Lu'd said was – yeah! There it was.

Unbuckling and unzipping as I went, I crashed through the swinging door, just like the one on every public lavatory I've ever used, and into a familiar white-tiled room harshly lit with bright fluorescent lighting that came dangerously close to creating a white-out in there, filled with marble-walled stalls, mirror above a long sink with four faucets, drains in the floor . . . Into a stall, barely noticing white roll of toilet-paper in the half-moon metal dispenser on the side, push door closed, slide bolt to lock, never know what might sneak up on you . . . *aaahhhhh* . . .

Some 20 minutes later, the delicious emptiness of colon and bladder an ecstasy that nearly made me cum, face and hands scrubbed shiny-clean at last with the aid of the scented liquid disinfectant soap from the shiny glass wall-dispensers over the sink, I made my way back up the passage to Lu'. I felt about 55 pounds lighter, as if I were floating, and ravenously hungry.

Lu' had a blanket spread tidily on the floor and was kneeling next to it, putting out sandwiches, plastic glasses of filled with Gatorade, and ceramic mugs filled with steaming –

"Coffee!!" I whooped, running toward her. "Where'd you get it, genius?"

Looking like a coprophilic cat loose in a diarrhea ward, she hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "The coffee? Oh . . . meet Catherine, here – she brought us a thermos full of the stuff, and the mugs. They spotted us in the office of Parlor Two on one of the security-channel monitors there, about an hour ago – see the remote, up there?" She pointed up at the ceiling. "So Cathy came out to invite us in, you see."

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I tilted my head back, found the lens of the remote in the ceiling – it was rather artfully seated among a cluster of rough-hewn protrusions from the ceiling’s surface, which looked like any of the other results of the long-ago catastrophe that had so badly damaged this neglected passageway, but were in fact the results of artifice rather than accident. With the relatively low level of light in the passage, and the paucity of wavelengths of red and yellow in it, it was just about impossible to see the lens or its housing unless you were looking straight at them to begin with. Even then, you might not realize what you were seeing, unless you were already aware that the remote was there.

I looked back at Lu’ again. Behind her stood a young woman dressed in the flame-colored trousers, white blouse, and indigo boots of Club Vesta’s security personnel. Smiling broadly, she said, “I brought some hot breakfast for you, too. Bet you can use it at this point! – Here.” So saying, she stooped down and set two flat cardboard boxes, each about the size and shape of an X-tra large Domino’s Pizza box, on the blanket next to Lu’. Lu’ grabbed one up and opened it. “Yum!” She rolled her eyes dramatically, licked her lips in delight. Taking out plates filled with scrambled eggs, toast, jam, and other gifts of Paradise from the box, she set them out on the blanket, then got the second box open and began arranging its contents on the blanket along with those of the first box.

“Tableware comes with it,” Cathy said, bending down and handing Lu’ and handful of plastic knives, forks, and spoons, along with some cloth napkins.

“Oh, Bacchus and Ceres!” I groaned, stumbling forward, toward this feast, which surely had been stolen right off the dining-tables on Olympus. “When can we –”

“Good food,  
Good eats,  
Good God –  
Let’s eat!”

crowed Lu’. “Now, dive in, stupid – go for it!”

Cathy, chuckling, squatted down to watch as Lu’ and I did just that. Ten (*burp!*) minutes later, as we sat back, replete and a little gassy, picking our teeth contentedly with toothpicks Cathy also provided, she asked us, “Now, would you guys dig a shower? There’s a suite available just inside our Parlor’s front door you can stay in for a while, if you want. It has this really enormous bathroom, with a huge sunken tub, a Jacuzzi, and even bubble-bath, if you’re so inclined. You can wash your hair, somebody’s there to set and style it, or even shape it, if you want. And would you believe you can have a manicure? Of course, we have laundry facilities, and can mend any tears or rips, as well as shine and polish your boots, even repair them, if you need. How does that sound?”

“Like a nice spray-can of Black Flag Demon-Bane to Saint Anthony,” I moaned. “When can you let us in – yesterday, maybe?”

Chuckling again, she said, “We can go as soon as we police the area here. I brought a big Hefty-Bag for the garbage, see?” She pulled it from one of her hip-pockets, shook it out, and squatted down to begin picking up garbage, such as bread-crusts, the boxes the food had come in, the torn foil from the packets that had dispensed creamer and sugar for our coffee, and putting it into the bag.

“What happens to the thermos, mugs, napkins, and so on you brought?” Lu’ asked her as the two of us, following Cathy’s lead, likewise began scouting the debris from our impromptu picnic, folding and storing the blanket (it was, of course, mine; crumb- and stain-free, Lu’s had already been stowed in her pack well before she’d ever begun to set out breakfast for us), and otherwise getting ready to go.

“Okay, ladies,” she said when the last of the trash had been stowed and the last of our gear returned to our packs or holstered, sheathed, or otherwise secured on our persons. She tossed the Hefty-bag over her left shoulder with one splendidly raffish gesture, and cocked her officer’s cap back at a jaunty angle with her other hand. “Walk this way!” she called cheerily over her shoulder as she began strutting down the passageway ahead of us, her lush buns swaying tauntingly – not to mention unreachably; Security never fraternized with Civilians, a policy reinforced rather thoroughly with those wickedly effective plasma-guns and other goodies Security personnel always carried with them when anywhere near any of us – with each step of her patent-leather boots, which had big, thick 2” heels.

Lu’ opened her mouth, preparing to reply, but before she could do so, Cathy added, now some way ahead of us, “And I have the cornstarch, if you need it!”

Lu' grimaced. "I hate you!" she whispered, seething, her eyes twin daggers aimed at the nape of Cathy's neck, somewhere under that rich, glowing auburn mass of curls that tumbled out from under her cap.

"Come on, Lu', let's go," I urged.

"Yeah, right." Muttering something inaudible, she set out after the Security guard, me taking up the rear a pace behind.

"What?"

"I said, it's really too bad they go armed here," Lu' repeated as we came down the passage behind Cathy. We were just rounding the bend in passageway, the great bronze door at the entrance to Parlor Two now coming in sight. "And I wish I could be sure she wasn't at least as good with her taijutsu as me. I'd just love to get one of these little assholes from Security off in a corner somewhere and . . ."

"And what, Lu'?"

She grinned ferally. "Oh, probably just break her cherry . . ."

"Now how do you know it hasn't been broken six dozen times over, already?"

"Honeybun, by now, even you, as thick between the ears as you are, oughtta know that there are cherries, and there are cherries, and then there are cherries, including a whole bunch which nobody back up there –" she pointed back up the passageway, in the direction we'd come from – "has even dreamed of yet! 'To boldly go where no being has gone before . . .'" She hummed a snatch of the theme-music from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

"Oh, now, what've you got against her?"

"So where was *she* when they were all tearing into that poor little girl with the bone-saws and cutting-torches back there –" Suddenly coming to a halt, her hands clutching her belly, she doubled over, retching loudly and convulsed with sobs. "Some cop, you bitch!" she screamed. Sobs wracked her strong, lithe frame like a mimosa in a hurricane, all her strength as nothing in the face of her grief, hatred, and outrage. "Oh, my God, my God –" Her voice rose toward dangerously high registers. hysteria's bright-rose incandescence edging it with a warning of incipient meltdown.

Cathy had already turned on her heels and begun running back up the passageway toward us. "What's wrong?" she called out as she came.

She was a cop, after all – how the fuck could I tell her we'd recently been less-than-innocent bystanders to several orgies of torture and murder, some of the victims of which had been kidnapped well away from Club Vesta and carried here very much against their will and desire. "Lu's – been through a lot. She –"

"Yeah," Cathy said grimly as she reached us and helped me catch Lu', who was on the verge of complete collapse, shaking all over and moaning in wordless agony of spirit. "Don't tell me – Parlor One. Or maybe Rounds One and Two, take your pick of Parlors."

I whipped my head up and stared at her. She was helping me lower Lu' to the ground, where Lu' curled around herself in an instinctive self-protective reflex, eyes tightly shut, a flood of tears leaking from them and covering her face from the brows down with salty sheets of sorrow, a fetus trapped in a womb of horror, racking sobs that made her whole body shudder and buck violently with the force of their passage. Cathy, her perfect teeth bared in an expression that was no more a smile than the rictus of an enraged chimp would have been, stared right back at me, eyes unblinking, two pools of crème de cacao laced with flecks of shaved gold and lit from within by ruddy bolts of heat-lightning.

As I let go of Lu' and stood back from her, Cathy, likewise having stood up once again, said, "Oh, down here, we know all about the things that go on up there – and since there's no way here but from there, now, is there? Remember? 'You can't go home again?'"

"I am beginning to think maybe I never was home in the first place," I muttered, before I quite realized I had done so.

"Gee – I bet a shrink would call that an insight." She and I now stood toe-to-toe next to Lu's reclining figure, glaring at each other like a couple of carnosaurus disputing the ownership of a freshly-killed meal, while Lu' continued to sob at our feet, all huddled into herself, a child devastated by unbearable grief. I looked down at Lu', and all thoughts of Cathy or anything else fled from me. I started to kneel down beside her, worried out of my mind for her sake. "So?" I flung absently at Cathy, not looking at her, aware of her only peripherally, if that.

"Oh, never mind," I heard her say in a preoccupied tone, as she joined me, kneeling down to see to Lu'. "It's – well, like I said, never mind. But yes, we do know all about Parlor One, back there – not to mention all

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the rest of the stuff that goes on upstairs . . . and everything below us, too. – Here, baby, are you all right?” she crooned to Lu’, taking Lu’s head onto her lap and stroking her golden mop of hair with astonishing tenderness.

I was stunned by the sudden, star-hot flare of jealousy that erupted somewhere deep in my old reptile brain as I watched her minister to Lu’, who reached out, eyes still closed, to clutch Cathy’s thighs, clinging tightly to her as a drowning man to a lifeboat. As I glared down at Cathy, barely restraining a wildly furious desire to throttle her then and there, she looked up at me and said, “My darling . . . we are not here to protect you. Not from yourselves, not from anyone else. That is not and never has been our job.”

“But – but why –”

“If you aren’t able to protect yourself from what you will likely encounter on any given level by the time you get there, there isn’t a damned thing we can do to help you, anyway. So why bother?”

“Why not? And what do –”

Her hand, which had been carefully stroking Lu’s dusty, dirty, disarranged hair, stopped in mid-motion. She seemed to gather herself, all at once, like a cat who has suddenly spotted prey – or perhaps a large dog.” “I’ll tell you, Eshda – we’re here to protect Club Vesta. No more – no less.”

“Now that is shit! Why –”

“Oh, it is, is it? *Think* about it, dammit – what do you know about us already? What have you seen? Or heard?”

Quickly I reviewed what I could remember of our journey from Club Vesta’s entrance to here. “Uh –”

“I’ll bet you’ve never once seen one of us involved in rescuing any of you . . . guests from anything, have you? Or breaking up fights, or anything else that was strictly between you-all, not threatening the club in any way.”

For a moment I knelt there, looking stupid, mouth open, mental gears burning. Suddenly, something clicked. I closed my mouth with deliberate care. “No, as a matter of fact, I haven’t. Come to think of it . . . we’ve only seen you security-people types around transition-points between Levels or sub-Levels – and once, I think, there was a fire, and a bunch of you suddenly showed up in fire-fighting gear and put it out before it could spread.”

“That’s right. – Here, honey, are you all right? You need help? I can call for a stretcher, if you need it,” she crooned to Lu’, stroking her hair again while she reached for a com-unit on her hip with her free hand.

But Lu’ had opened her eyes and stopped sobbing, and evidently was getting it back together. Putting her left hand flat on the ground and concentrating with everything she had, suddenly she heaved herself up, with a groan, into a sitting position. “I can walk, dammit – I can walk!” she snapped at Cathy. In spite of her attempted bravado, she sounded like a frightened little girl trying to seem brave, not the maddeningly competent, always-together, frighteningly deadly woman who’d nearly driven me nuts for years with the inferiority complex I got from just hanging around her and watching her in action. A great wave of sorrow at seeing her like this washed through me. Oh, please, be Lu’ again, be that maddeningly unreachable star for me, anything rather than this!

“Okay, can we help you get up, baby?” Without waiting for Lu’s response, Cathy slipped an arm around her waist and, with one graceful motion, rose to her feet, pulling Lu’d up with her.

“God damn it, let me go!” whined Lu’, batting at her ineffectively, her strengthless voice and actions shocking me to the core.

“Lu’ – Lu’!” I cried. “It’s cool! Calm down, already – okay?” I got to my feet to join her and Cathy.

“Oh, shit, Esh’ –” Suddenly she turned to me, threw herself against my chest, put her head on my shoulder and turned her face against my neck, and began sobbing wildly again.

But this time she didn’t collapse, and soon, with Cathy’s help, we had her calmed down enough to walk the rest of the way with us, under her own power, down to the entrance to Parlor Two and on inside. Cathy had an electronic key that looked like a slab of burnished gold for the main entrance to the Parlor; she slipped it into an unobtrusive slot near one side of the door that was made nearly invisible by dint of the fact that it formed part of a water-course in a section of the door that was a relief map of some kind. There was a buzz, then a loud click. The door swung open. We went through; on its own, the door swung back shut behind us. The sound of the lock slipping home was not loud, but very, very final.

Inside the doorway was a large, well-lit, elegantly-furnished room – “foyer” was a wildly misleading term for it; “lounge” might have done better, maybe. At both sides, and ahead of us, doors led from it to unknown territory. Sofas, overstuffed chairs, low tables, and something that looked like a stereo-system,



complete with CD-player and shelves below for storing the disks, were arranged along the walls between the doors. Overhead was the source of the light, a large fixture that looked like an elegant crystal chandelier; it equipped with fluorescent lights in the shape of candles rather than bulbs, but the light was not as harsh as that in the lavatory back in the passage behind us.

“Okay,” Cathy told us, steering Lu’ to a large, comfortable sofa upholstered with the ubiquitous, rugged, hemp-cloth, this time with a print of soft sea-colors of mauve, lavender, green, and blue. “Wait here for me, chicks. I’m going to go tell ‘em to red’ up a room for you. Neither of you is in any shape for anything more strenuous right now than a long, hot soak, a couple more good meals, and a long, undisturbed sleep. Until you’ve got that out of the way, we’ll have you stay right here, in one of our guest-suites here in the waiting area. – Be right back.” So saying, she turned and bounced away through a side-door, opening it to enter, then slamming it shut behind her as she jumped through into the room beyond, very nearly in one motion. I caught a brief glimpse of something vast, radiating an unspeakably archaic presence, like a demon from a Devonian Hell, before the door closed behind Cathy; I couldn’t be sure what, if anything, I’d seen. There had been an impression of obscenely rugose gray skin, large, membranous gray wings, five tentacles, each about 5’ long, radiating from the base of the trunk of its body in place of feet, a star-shaped head with a central, gilled orifice for breathing and one stalked, ruby eye at the tip of each of the five sections of its pentagrammatical head . . . The word Yuggoth flitted across my mind like a radiation-seared bat across a thermonuclear wasteland. Then it was hardly even a memory.

Sitting on the sofa, Lu’ slumped over, half-reclining against its back. I sat down next to her, watching over her until Cathy returned.

“Okay, ladies, come on with me. We’ve got a suite all ready and waiting for you, no problem. Somebody left earlier than we’d planned, and it had already been cleaned up before we got here. We’ll get you into a hot bath, and I’ll ring up the commissary and have them send something over for you to eat afterward.”

“How ‘bout a nice bhong?” mumbled Lu’ as we got her up and walking toward a door across the room from the one from which Cathy’d just re-emerged. She sounded drugged with shock, exhaustion, and emotional upheaval. Sleep or no sleep, she still hadn’t recovered from Parlor One of this Round.

“The hell you say,” Cathy gritted. She took out another electronic key – or maybe the same one, there didn’t seem to be any difference; maybe there was a master program in it for a number of doors, or even classes of doors, a sort of electronic equivalent of a skeleton-key – and passed it through a slot at the side of the door. “You’ve had about enough of that shit for awhile – like, years, honey!” The door opened with a sharp click and a tone, different from that of the main door. From somewhere came a chime: bing-bong-bong-bing!

Once inside the room, even Lu’, as nearly out of it as she was, was taken aback by its elegant opulence. “Jesus – I’ve seen Olympic-sized swimming pools – but a bed? There must be a fucking *acre* of linen on that thing!”

“Look again, cookie,” said Cathy, “that’s real Shantung silk. – C’mon, bath-time for the two of you . . .” She drew Lu’ along by the arm, leading her to a doorway on the other side of the enormous room, and through it into a room just as large, just as elegant, but all ceramic tile, Italian chrome, steel, glass, toweling, and plastic, done in black, white, pink, cerise, and gray, where the outer room was sumptuous hardwood, silk, linen, wool, goose-down comforters, wallpaper with a texture like raw silk, the color of sky, delicately patterned in gold with something Chinese-y, and wall-to-wall carpet the color of Northern seas and a pile so deep I could have safely done a swan-dive into it from the 25-foot board. Like the bedroom lighting, the light here was soft and indirect, coming from fixtures along the walls near the ceiling, except for three enormous, 300-watt incandescent fixtures set in a row above the sink; the indirect lighting, like that in the outer room, turned on via a switch near the door, while the bulbs over the sink had their own switch, at one side of the huge mirror. The modern lighting excepted, the suite was like something out of the set of Spielberg & Lucasfilm’s *Suleiman and Sa’aba*, or Akira Kurosawa’s *The Court of the Lion* – only for real.

“I think I just died and went to Heaven!” I said in wonder.

“Don’t ever tell *Better Homes & Gardens* about this, Esh’,” breathed Lu’. “They’d never believe it . . .”

Someone had already drawn the water in the enormous sunken tub, all black, pink-and-white-veined marble, that filled the center of the room. The water in it bubbled furiously. “An Olympic-sized Jacuzzi, yet!” I giggled.

“All part of the service, ma’am! – Okay, you two get undressed and climb into the tub.”

While Lu' and I stripped, Lu' still a bit wobbly but recovering rapidly, Cathy went over to a large rack at the side of the room stacked high with towels, began pulling things off it, piling them up in her arms. "Here, ducks – towels and wash-cloths. – Oh, and let me get you something to put on when you get out . . ." She ducked into the bedroom briefly, came back with two long, flowing swathes of dream cut off a rainbow bush somewhere in the middle of Paradise. Holding them up for us to see, she told us, "Lounging robes."

"Where does this place get these things?" I mused. "You get 'em at Bloomingdale's, maybe?" I asked as I squirted creamy rose-scented liquid soap from a dispenser onto the palm of my left hand and spread it lavishly onto my chest, belly, throat, thighs, underarms.

"Aw, come on now, sweetie, nothing so tacky!" she drawled. "Actually –" She held one of them up, looking it over critically, considering. Made of what had to be raw silk and the finest, most delicate snow-white French lace embroidered with tiny, perfect roses of yellow and cerise, the garment had a body the color of fresh, ripe peaches. "Yeah," she finally decided, "this came from the harem-stores of Harun Al-Raschid. And this one, now –" Laying the first one down on a small white table parked nearby, she held the other one up. Like the first, it had to have had all the weight of a dream, the mass of a fantasy. Except for the lace that trimmed it like wisps of cloud drifting through heaven, it was the color of noontime April sky after a Spring rain. Again like the first garment, it had a long, long train with a "kanaka loop" to enable the wearer to walk in it without tripping, and only a sash to secure its closure, no buttons, hooks, or ties. "Yep – this one is from the wardrobe of the favorite concubine of Suleiman ben Daoud – thought it was one of the things they whipped up for Louis de Soleil's lady for a minute there, but I was wrong. I guess I was thinking of the lingerie over in that other suite . . . no, that can't be right, those were the ones from the guest-room at Sappho's school," she said musingly.

"Right," I said. "Really, though, where do you get these gorgeous things?"

"Really, I just told you." Cocking an eyebrow at me.

I started to make a sarcastic reply when my eyes locked with hers. A chill raced down my spine as I looked into them, like hanging suspended high above Norwegian fjords in Winter – or looking up the bore of a twin-barreled plasma gun, maybe. Her grin got wider and wider.

I looked away first. Pretending a vast interest in the pretty, floral-patterned plastic containers of soap, shampoo, and the like arranged invitingly on a step-back ledge in the tub's rim, I muttered, "Well, if you say so. – Hey, you said something about shampoos, and someone to do our hair and nails? Here's the shampoo, I see. Where are the lackeys?"

She snorted. When I turned back to look at her, she said, "Stay here. I'll see what I can do. Back in a mo'." She left.

"Hey – ain't this something, Esh'?" Lu' asked suddenly. Turning to her, I found her sitting on the ledge-seat of the tub next to me, leaning back against the sloping side of the tub, a great, big, shit-eating grin plastered on her face. "Hot tub – Jacuzzi – even perfume in the water – smell it?"

I sniffed, and caught hints of wildflowers, roses, sandalwood, cloves, ginger, aloes in the clouds of steam that rose about us off the water's surface. "I haven't felt this good since the time Erik treated me to a weekend stay in a suite at the old Hollywood Hotel that time we visited SoCal . . ."

"Well, you sure look like the kitty who got into the creamery on a Friday night," I replied, feeling a crushing weight of anxiety and dread finally begin to slide off my shoulders and fall away from me. Lu' was going to be all right.

"And you don't, my dear?" Stretching out her right arm against the side of the tub next to her, she said, "Come over here and sit with Mama, okay?"

She'd never said that before! Well – what the hell. How long had we been friends, now? Not to mention the whipped cream and other delights we'd sampled together since we'd first arrived at Club Vesta (just how long ago? I couldn't remember, the hours and days here vanished into mist and fog when I tried to review them). So if we'd balled each other, already, by now in at least a dozen different ways – or maybe a hundred – wasn't it about time for me to stop shying like a frightened horse from either giving or receiving expressions of simple affection with her?

Still a little shy, I slowly shifted myself around in the tub until I was, like her, reclining against the sloped tubside, my head and neck pillowed on her right arm, my left arm encircling her waist.

We had nearly fallen asleep like that, side by side, content just to share the warmth of the tub, the pleasant tingle of the jets of water against our skin, when Cathy returned. With her was a petite blonde woman wearing glasses with fantastic frames, all translucent, iridescent bubbled plastic, glitter, and

embedded hearts and stars, a white smock over her sky-blue trousers and light-green blouse. The newcomer was built like Dolly Parton – or rather, like Dolly Parton would have been built if she'd been nursing triplets at the time. Her breasts were enormous. With her slender waist and hourglass hips, slim arms and neck and delicate-looking hands, she looked like a Babylonian icon of Astarte. She pushed a multi-tiered cart about 5' tall, filled with a bewildering array of shampoos, conditioners, scissors, combs, and 28 dozen other cosmetological aids and implements of destruction, including the blow-drier which crowned the whole assembly, in a place of honor at the center of the cart's top tier.

"Hi, ladies – I'm Stella!" she called to us cheerily in her rich soprano, giving us a bright grin and a wave of one small hand that seemed to spill warmth, vibrant good cheer, and ebullience onto us as if from some vast celestial cauldron that cooked up the world's joy. She came to a halt not far from the tub, pulling her cart around so that it ended up against one end of the wash-stand. "I'm going to do your hair and nails – okay?"

Lu' was almost asleep; I answered for both of us. "Sure. Do we have to get out of the tub for this?"

"Oh, no – not for the wash, anyway. You're just perfect where you are – stay right there! I'll bring the shampoo basins over to you. Just a minute, here –" She began rummaging through her poor, opulently overburdened cart's cargo, looking for shampoo, basin, and conditioners.

"Okay, ladies, I'll leave you two here, in Stella's capable hands, while she does your hair and gives you both a manicure," said Cathy. "After that, you can lounge or nap for a couple of hours while I take your things over to the laundry and program menus for you into the commissary. I'll be back later on, when I bring you something to eat. We'll have your clothes back, fresh and clean, by the time you've had a real sleep and a good breakfast. Okay?" Stooping, she began picking up our clothing from the floor, where we'd dropped them in careless disarray in our haste to get ready for our bath.

"Hey – my –" Lu' started to cry, alarm opening her eyes wide.

Briefly looking back at her, Cathy said reassuringly, "Don't worry, I'll leave your belts and hardware right over there, in the corner, where they'll be sure to stay dry. Your backpacks are in the other room; I've left them alone. Okay?"

Heaving a vast sigh of relief, Lu's sank back against the side of the tub once again. "Yes. Thank you."

"Jeez, girl – you two have enough armament in here to fight World War II all over again – and win it, too!" Cathy grumbled as she drew one of Lu's boot-daggers out of her boot and carefully laid it down. "Oh, well . . ."

"Hey, Cathy?"

She whipped around to look at me. "Yes?"

"You never did tell me what your job is – why you're here."

"I didn't? – Oh, yeah, I guess not. Well, you see, it's to make sure none of you lunatics ever burns the place down, or blows it up, or anything like that. You-all can come and go as you please (once you've done the whole Tour, and become a full-fledged member of Club Vesta, of course), as long as you don't call any unwanted outside attention to the Club, or do anything that presents a serious threat to its existence.

"But if anything should ever happen to the Club – well, that's it, you see, it's all over, then, isn't it? So we're here to protect the Club itself . . . at any cost."

"Gee, you make it sound as if the fate of the whole world hung on its continued existence," I said sarcastically. "– Oooh, that feels good, Stella!" She had filled a basin from the sink with warm water and brought it over by the tub, setting it down next to us along with her vials of shampoo and conditioners and several huge fluffy white towels. Starting with me first, she was briskly massaging the shampoo into my hair, which she'd just wetted down with water from the basin.

"I do?" Cathy said, responding to my last remark to her. "Well, whaddaya know! Anyway – shit! What's this monster loaded with, anyway – spent uranium slugs?" she asked, holding my .45 Colt, which she had just taken from my side-holster. Turning the enormous revolver over in her hands with great care, making sure the muzzle was pointed up and away from everyone in the room, she added, "Weren't these dinosaurs phased out when Wyatt Earp went to Boot Hell?"

"Oh, hell no! I got that brand-new from a gun store in Seattle, about a mile from where I was living at the time."

"Gun store"? Since when have there been any of those for civilians in the United States since passage of the XXIX Amendment?"

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“Hunh? Constitution who? I – hey, watch it, that hurt!” In the process of working the lather from the shampoo through my hair, Stella had unknowingly hit a sore spot, right near the crown of my head.

“Ooops – sorry! . . . Feels like crust down here on your scalp, hon’. You get cut on the head?”

“I don’t – oh, wait a minute. I bet that’s from the last place we were in Parlor One. There was this chick who tried to break a 2” X 4” or something over my head, I think.”

“I guess – yes, indeedy, you have a *lovely* scalp-wound there, all right, darling,” she said musingly, gingerly probing to check its extent. “Here, just a sec’ . . .” Getting to her feet, she went over to her cart and plucked something off one of its lower tiers. Returning, she knelt behind me once again. I heard a cap unscrewed, then liquid plashing. “Now sit tight, sweetie – this’ll sting a bit, but it’ll heal up a lot faster –”

“Eee-yiiiiiii!”

“Okay, okay, honey, hold it, all done, all over, sweetheart . . .” She screwed the cap of the bottle back on, set it down beside her.

“*Je-zus Kee-rist*, what’s *in* that shit, anyway – *napalm*?” I cried, my scalp still stinging as if I’d just been mugged by the granddaddy of all hornets.

“Witch hazel. I know it stings, honey – but it’s wonderful for healing up cuts and abrasions. You’ll heal up about twice as fast as you would have otherwise.”

“Oh.”

“All right, now, relax, lemme rinse your hair, then I’ll use some really lovely scalp conditioner on you, has awapuhi and jojoba oils and flower-essences in it, plus an extra-special secret ingredient –”

“Which is?”

“Elephant shit from the Xi’an elephant-stables, circa first T’ang Emperor. Supposed to make your hair soft as silk, with a luster like nightingale’s wings. All the court ladies paid king’s ransoms for the stuff to mix into the stuff they put on their hair,” said Cathy wickedly, still kneeling down to sort our clothing and weaponry out.

“You should see the look on your face, girl!” laughed Lu’, next to me.

“Well, I never! Colonel Moore, you should be ashamed of yourself!” huffed Stella.

“What do you think you’re doing, anyway?”

I had just started to relax once more when Stella added, “You know damned good and well that it was the during the reign of the third emperor of the Ming dynasty when elephant-dung was all the rage as a cosmetological additive! The very idea! – Oh, sweetie,” she suddenly laughed, “relax, we’re just pulling your leg!”

“Yeah, we never put elephant-shit in the cosmetics. – Only eye of newt and toe of –”

“Colonel, please! You’re going to have this poor lady as nervous as a cat at a pit-bull convention!” exclaimed Stella.

“Okay, I’m outta here, anyway. Ladies, I’ll be back in a few hours,” said Cathy, rising to her feet, our boots and a large pile of very dirty clothing stuffed into yet another Hefty-bag (maybe she had a dispenser of the things tucked under her blouse or something?) that she clutched to her chest. “See you then. Relax, enjoy, get some rest, whatever.”

I murmured assent. “Is this not Hell? Nor want I out of it!” purred Lu’ in agreement, lounging contentedly next to me, waiting for her turn.

At last Stella was finished with me for the moment, having rinsed out the conditioner with a fresh basin of warm water. She went back to the sink for more warm water, then came back and started in on Lu’. When she was through washing our hair, she asked, “Who’s for a hair-styling? Trim? Anybody up for it?”

Lu’s heavy page-boy badly needed a trim. My own hair, now butt-length, was all over split and raggedy, unevenly chopped ends. We were both up for it.

“Okay – hup! Out, now, so I can blow-dry your hair – we don’t want to risk having it fall in the tub and electrocute you, now, do we?” she added with sadistic cheer.

I gagged, remembering one of the more interesting parties we’d gone to in Parlor One of this Level.

Reluctantly, we climbed up out of the warm, fragrant water, using the built-in steps at one end of the tub, and began to towel off.

“Here, let me help.” Stella grabbed a towel and added her efforts to ours, first helping me get Lu’ dried off, then helping Lu’ to towel me down. For once, that maddeningly elusive after-the-bath wet spot in the center of my back got completely dry before I got back into my clothes, so that it wouldn’t lurk there in

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ambush, waiting to zap me with one of those exquisitely diabolical \*ITCHES!!\* after I was once more completely dressed (always, of course, at the worst possible moment).

There were several wrought-iron decorator chairs there in the bathroom. In spite of their elegantly fragile appearance, they were actually quite sturdy, and the seat of each was very comfortably upholstered with pretty paisley-printed, satin-weave silk cushions, about 2" thick. Having us wrap up in big bath-towels, Stella had each of us sit in one of the chairs. Then she went to work.

First, she gave Lu' a trim, evening up her golden mop all around, balancing and shaping. Then she turned to my own great mare's-nest, taking off a good inch or so from the back, evening the sides, shaping that long, maverick cow's-lick in front.

Once she was satisfied with the shape and texture of our hair, she styled us both. Lu's hair got a loose under-curl, to give it body; she sat mine in a myriad curls, large and the back, progressively smaller toward the front, down to tiny elf-locks where feathery, blow-away short strands tended to be, by the ears and at the nape. On both of us, to set our hair she used big fat spongy things permeated with live steam from a gadget she had on her cart, which plugged into an outlet above the countertop of the wash-stand, next to the sink; winding the hair around it in big, soft spirals or tight turns, depending upon the length of the hair she was working with and the sort of curl she wanted it to take, she secured all in place with half-cylinder plastic caps, bobby-pins, and hair-clips. Then she used a blow-drier to help speed up the process of making the hair take a curl – "The live steam makes it take quick and hard, but it sure won't hurt to put some English on it!"

Finally, when the steam and the heat had done their work, she took the curlers off, then brushed, fluffed, teased, and otherwise strong-armed our hair into gorgeous compliance with her will. Lu's hair was now a stunning heavy golden halo about her head, making her look like a lioness's version of a saint. Mine had become a satiny midnight waterfall cascading down my back and shoulders like basaltic magma from an eruption of Erebus flowing across Antarctic plains.

By now, both of us were ready for a nap, relaxed and blissful from all the grooming, stroking, and pampering. "Hey – I just realized something."

"What, Lu'?"

"If we take a nap, it'll ruin all this lovely work!"

"Nothing that can't be done over – and better, too," said Stella, starting to put her things back on her cart. "You go have your nap, girls, I'll just pick up my things, here, and leave you two for now. Somebody'll be in to tidy up the bathroom, don't worry about it. If you need me again, all you gotta do is just ask!"

So saying, she left, humming something familiar—something, rich and complex and impossible.

"Lu'."

"What?"

"I could have sworn she was humming the melody to '*Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*' from *Carmina Burana*."

"?"

"But that's not possible! You know how complex that thing is? It takes a full orchestra to reproduce it! She was doing the entire melody – all eight parts simultaneously – all by herself!"

"I"

"That's what I thought. – Well, I think I'll turn in for a while. There isn't very much to do right now, anyway, is there?"

"I'm with you – I still feel wiped out."

"Okay, let's hit the rack."

Leaving our towels behind, we went back to the bedroom. The fantastically lovely robes Cathy'd showed us earlier had been laid out carefully, across the end of the bed – she must have done it as she was leaving. Lu' put on the one that looked like long swatch of rain-washed sky; I put on the other, feeling as if I were wrapping myself up in something stolen from Aurora's wardrobes. The feel of the silk on my skin was so voluptuously luxuriant that I nearly came as I put it on.

We jumped up onto the vast bed, which was very high off the floor. Crawling across its satiny comforters to the middle, we pulled back comforters, rose-red woolen blanket, and heavy linen sheets, and slipped beneath the covers, lying down, preparing to take a nap, facing each other, lying on our sides facing each other, parentheses in flesh.

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I had just closed my eyes when I felt Lu's body move against mine. She had snuggled up to me, tucking her head into the hollow of my shoulder, pillowing her cheek on my breast. Her arms had encircled me tightly. Startled, I opened my eyes just as she began to sob broken-heartedly, her breath warm at the base of my throat, her tears spilling over my breast, which was bared to the navel by my tie-less robe. "Oh, Erik, darling, will I ever see you again?" I could barely hear her, so low was her voice, and muffled against my throat. "Oh, the murder, the blood, the *stink* . . ." she sobbed brokenly.

A vast tenderness suddenly filled me as I looked down at her, huddled there as she was against my breast and belly, clinging to me as I were her last hope for salvation. Carefully, I put my arms around her, letting one hand reach up to stroke her hair. Never, I told myself silently, never will I let anyone hurt you, Lu'. Never. I'll kill anyone who tries it – bare-handed. Slowly.

We drifted off to sleep together like that, she in my arms. As I dropped from nightside of Eden into Dream's great abysses, I could still feel the sobs that racked her body, tsunamis pounding against the shores of my consciousness until they shattered it, and I was wholly asleep.

\* \* \*

Groggily, slowly and with difficulty, I swam back up from the Deeps and into the waking world. "Uh – whuzzat?" I mumbled at the hand that shook my shoulder.

"Hey, sleepyheads, wake up! Dinnertime!" It was Cathy.

"Uh . . . yuh – yeah. Whuzza time?" Lu' was still asleep, her head against my breast. She hadn't moved a muscle since we'd fallen asleep. All that had happened from the moment that I'd finally fallen into the midst of the tenebrous borderlands between the ill-defined realms of Poseidon and the terrible Tartarean wastes of Hades until now was that her sobbing had ceased; a very soft, rhythmic susurrus, far too delicate and economical to qualify for anything as gross as the word "snore" whispered from her nostrils, nothing more.

"Time? It's dinnertime, chicks – why do you want to know any more? Say it's gibbous-waning-two – is that any better?"

Then I remembered: far below ground, cut off from the world of light and Sun and night sky as we were, here, clocks and watches were utterly irrelevant. Of all the Heavenly Hosts, only Luna, Whose relentless tides acted on every molecule of water in our bodies, had any meaning here. "Uh . . . never . . . never mind. What's up?"

"I've brought you dinner – lots and lots of veggies, candied fruits, real thin slices of beef sautéed in honeyed wine, Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee, a really good California white wine, lots of other stuff. You'll love it, ducks. C'mon, up, now."

I was suddenly overwhelmingly aware of the most heavenly fragrance coming from somewhere off to the side. Nectar and ambrosia could have had no more seductive scents. I realized that in spite of the huge breakfast we'd eaten earlier, thanks mostly to Cathy and the food she'd brought out to us in the passageway before we'd entered this Parlor, I was ravenous. I felt as if I could have eaten a horse, raw – one that had been lying around for quite a while under a hot August sky, say – right about now. Whatever she'd brought, it smelled so good I had real trouble not jumping straightway out of bed, smacking her aside, and diving into the food head-first, right then and there. "Oh, Bacchus, yes – wait a minute . . ." I turned back to Lu'. Gently stroking her nose from bridge to tip – something Erik did which never failed to wake her up, she'd told me once – I was rewarded with the sight of two golden eyes, furiously bright and alert, staring into mine.

"Esh'?" Her voice was steel wire stretched to its limits. Her body was completely tensed up, ready for combat.

"Lu', relax, it's me – Eshda."

She let out her breath in a huge *Whoof!* of relief. "Oh, Jesus – you scared the hell out of me, woman! What – what's going on? Where are we? . . . Oh, yeah, I remember, now . . ."

"Cathy's come back, with food. Want some?"

She started to refuse, then, as I had, caught a whiff of the wonderful odors coming from the feast Cathy'd brought. "Oh!"

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Sitting bolt upright, a broad grin spreading across her face like sunrise, she said, “I guess I do, at that.” Yawning hugely, she stretched her arms luxuriantly, then sat back and knuckled her eyes, getting the cobwebs of dream out of them. “I gotta pee, first, though.”

“Sure, why not?” said Cathy. “I’ll have your dinner laid out for you when you come back.”

Yawning mightily once more, Lu’ wriggled over to the side of the bed nearest the bathroom, jumped down to the floor, and made for the head. Soon thereafter, I heard the sound of her urine splashing into the water in the commode. The power of suggestion, of course, instantly suggested a similar need to me. “I’d like to help you set up, Cathy, but I think I’d better hit the old Elimination Trail myself, just as soon as the head’s available again.”

“No problem! There’s no real work to this – actually, it’s a nice break from most of our duty, which is either trying to manage the Zoo from Hell (at lunchtime!), or deathly boring, because there’s nothing to do. Enjoy – and do remember what the constipated mathematician did.”

“What’s that?”

“Why, he worked it out on his pocket calculator!”

“Oh, *feehhh!* Okay, here comes Lu’ – I’m outta here! Gangway!” Lu’ was just emerging from the bathroom. I ran for it.

A long, satisfied eternity later, no longer burdened by the inside-out pain of a bladder filled far beyond normal capacity, I re-emerged from the head to find Cathy setting out the last odds and ends of table-service from her cart, laying them out among the various dishes, mugs, wine-glasses, and tableware already set out for a feast fit for a Roman orgy on the pretty, glass-topped, wrought-iron table that stood against one wall of the bedroom, accompanied by four more of those deceptively delicate-looking chairs, like the ones in the bathroom. Lu’ had already taken a seat at the table, and was attacking her food with a joyous gusto she hadn’t showed since we’d left Level VI behind us. Watching her, my heart turned over. Once upon a time, I had acquired a cat by the expedient of sneaking it away from a family that had consistently neglected and mistreated it. When I got him home and laid out a BIG bowl of Little Friskies and a saucer heaped with chopped liver in front of him, he’d pounced on his food like a little tiger – it was probably the first good meal he’d seen in his entire life, at least since he’d been weaned. Watching Lu’, I saw a heartbreaking similarity between her and Tombo on that first day after I’d taken him home with me.

“Come on, girl – food won’t get any warmer!” crowed Lu’ around a mouthful of razor-sliced honeyed beef, beckoning for me to join her with one huge, inward swoop of her left hand, the fork in her right stabbing down to her plate to spear another piece of meat.

I didn’t really need the invitation. Suddenly salivating fit to drown Pavlov’s dog, I dove at the table and dug in in a way that would have left the Hungry Tiger himself aghast. Dimly I was aware of Cathy laughing in the background. Ignoring her, I concentrated on wolfing down the food as fast as I could for a timeless interval that ended only when I’d finally blunted the razor’s edge of that terrible hunger.

Then, sitting back for a moment, looking in astonishment at the remains of what could have been two good-sized meals on my plate, I looked up at Cathy and said, “I had no idea I was this hungry! We had breakfast not so long ago – what is this?”

“Well, from what Lu’ told me before you woke up, when I first came out into the tunnel to see what was up with you, you two must’ve a great deal of acid up there in Parlor One of this Round. It was probably loaded with strychnine – as you probably know, that’s often cut into LSD to boost its high by pushers who can make a higher profit that way. (The fact that it doesn’t make it a better high, just a more . . . energetic one, and one which can kill, never seems to deter a lot of people from taking the damned stuff, somehow, but when you want to get high, I guess it’s any old junk in a drought, isn’t it?) Once strychnine has been flushed out of your mid-brain, where your appetite center is, so it doesn’t continue to block your appetite, your body begins to crave all the things it needs to detoxify and clean the stuff out. (I know the stuff is supposed to be cumulative, but normal metabolic action, let alone all the vitamin C you two’ve been taking all along, gets rid of it eventually if more isn’t dumped back into the body as fast as it gets flushed out – actually, it’s the damage it does to the neuroendocrine system that’s cumulative, though strychnine itself isn’t necessarily so). It’s just about that time for you, baby – what has it been since you left Parlor One, assuming you’ve been with us about three-quarters of a day or so? I’d make it about three days, just about right for you to suddenly to get the raving Hiroshima Godzilla Mothermunchies.

“You’ll notice a cellophane-wrapped packet, there by your glass of juice.” She nodded at it. “Those are megavitamin/mineral supplements, with appropriate herbs in them to boost their effectiveness. You

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probably need them desperately just about now, so be sure to take them right away. They'll wash down nicely with that juice – it's fresh-squeezed pink Texas grapefruit, with a little honey to sweeten it (otherwise, it's just a tad too tart)."

My mid-brain, suddenly stunned out of its long, long Jurassic dreaming by the ebbing of the strychnine tides that had so recently laved it in delicious, deadly ecstasy, seemed to have it all over my cerebrum when it came to smarts: even as Cathy finished speaking, I found myself opening the little packet she'd indicated, guzzling down its contents with the aid of the juice. Astonished, I watched myself attack the packet, shake out the tablets and capsules, put them in my mouth, pick up the glass, take a gigantic slug of juice and send them on their way on a flood-tide of almost cloyingly sweet pink liquid; it was as if it were someone else's hands, someone else's mouth, tongue, throat, another mind and will informing them than my own.

Before I could marvel too long over this, however, I was once again busily attacking my food. (I won.)

Oblivious to all else until I'd consumed at least half of everything Cathy had laid out for us there on the table, finally I had my fill. Pouring myself a cup of scalding hot Jamaica Blue Mountain from a silver carafe set in pride of place, at the table's center, adding a generous amount of thick, yellow cream, sweet as memories of the womb, from the delicate, snowy china creamer next to it and following that with a spoonful of turbinado sugar from the matching sugar bowl nearby, I burped contentedly and leaned back, to sip my coffee and savor the moment. "That was magnificent!" I told Cathy.

"That was nothin'," she said, self-deprecatingly. "You oughtta see what we do for the High (heh!) Holy Days . . ."

Lu', who had finished slightly before me, interjected, "So why all this pampering?"

"Hmm?" Cathy was busy picking up dishes, tureens, flatware, and other things from the table and putting them back onto her cart.

"So what's the point of all this – this *spoiling*?" Lu' said, waving her arm in a languid gesture to indicate the room, the meal, the service. "Why do all this for a couple of nonentities like us? Are you fattening us up for something?"

"Well, how about 'angels unawares'?"

Lu' looked blank. I remembered the story of Philemon and Baucis, but kept my mouth shut. At our silence, Cathy shook her head sadly. "What *are* they doing with education these days? They seem to leave out all the best parts," she said, putting the butter-dish, creamer, and sugar bowl back onto the cart. "Oh, well, it's not that important. At any rate, we do this for anyone who manages to make it this far, their first time here."

Looking a bit crestfallen, Lu' said, "You do this for everybody who comes to the Club?"

"I didn't say that, baby, now, did I? Replay that last tape – and this time, listen carefully to what I *did* say, not what you *think* I did."

"Hey, wait a minute."

"Yes, Eshda?"

"How many of those who begin the Tour up there on Level I ever manage to get this far?"

A grim smile hardened her mouth. Go to the head of the class, girl. As she picked up the last few odds and ends from the table and stowed them on the cart with everything else, Cathy said, "Oh . . . I'd say one out of about fifty thousand might be a good estimate. Maybe less."

Lu' looked stunned. Her face mirrored my own emotional fulminate perfectly. "Now wait a minute! How many girls and women set out on this damned Tour each year, anyway?"

"Oh, let's see . . ." Cathy gazed off into intergalactic space somewhere, considering. Then, returning her gaze to me, she said, "Maybe three thousand or so. Give or take a few."

"That's – you mean, someone succeeds in making it this far only once every 48 or 49 years?! Oh, my God – what happens to the ones who don't –"

"Of course," she explained hastily, those figures have changed sharply over time, one way and another. At one time, many more women came here each year – and most of them did the complete Tour and graduated successfully. During other times, hardly anyone came here at all – and next to none ever completed the Tour. I guess the statistics now are about average."

Suddenly I was confronted with memories of the old, old, hideously infantilized flappers, bopsters, rockers, Daddy's Little Rich Girls, Mommy's Little Martyrs, the j.d.'s and pachucas and gangsta girls, the hysterically pious nuns, the sheep-like followers of every sort of religious or political or literary guru that ever was, happily settled down for the rest of forever 'way back up there on Level I. Musingly, I said,



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“They can’t retrace their steps, of course – ‘You can’t go home again.’ So either they drop out somewhere, and just stay there, or . . .”

“Or else they eat it, somewhere along the way,” Lu’ finished my thought with her characteristic bloody-minded efficiency. “Don’t they?”

“That’s correct,” said Cathy, looking sadder than ever.

“My God, you mean to tell us that out of *three thousand people* who come here for the first time, each year, at most maybe *one* of them can ever go home again, ever make it to the end and leave? That’s – that’s monstrous!” Lu’ declared, outraged. Her eyes were twin suns, her teeth bared in what most definitely was not a smile.

Cathy set down the plate she had been holding on the cart, then turned and faced Lu’ squarely. Putting her fists before her on the table in a rigid brace, she said in frighteningly gentle tones, “Oh, really? Honey, tell me they didn’t come here of their own free will, why don’t you – any of them!”

“How about the – the ones who get dragged down here for fun and games with the ladies who like to play in Parlor One of Level VII,” I snapped.

“They aren’t on the Tour, are they?” Cathy said, turning to look at me, her voice, if anything, even softer. Her eyes were crushed blue ice – or, perhaps, straight off the surface of a O-class supergiant – in a *very* late stage of evolution.

“But that’s *murder*, Goddammit!” I cried, now truly outraged. “That’s the most utterly heartless –”

“Yes, it is murder,” Cathy continued, staring now at me with those terrifying eyes. “But we were talking about true volunteers for the Tour, weren’t we? Let’s please keep it to that, shall we?”

I opened my mouth to shout at her – then closed it with an angry snap, What, after all, could I do?

“We’ll get back to the . . . abducted non-voluntary personnel in a moment,” she went on, in that same deadly quiet tone of voice. “For now, please stick to the subject at hand.” Not even bothering to consider the idea that I might not, she went right on: “Have you met even one person down here, other than abductees, who truly hadn’t come here of her own free will and desire?”

Starting to get mad all over again, I began, “If you take prior awareness of everything that could happen here into consid- –”

“I don’t. Stick to the point.”

“But the essence of free will is inextricably bound up with the existence of truly informed choice, and –”

“Keep your voice down, will you? I’m not deaf! – And is it, really?”

“But that’s neither here nor there. Let me rephrase the question: Have you ever met anyone here who, coming to the entrance and voluntarily going through the intake procedure there, the way the two of you did, and electing to stay and go on the Tour, rather than backing out, reported afterward regretting that she made that choice?”

“No,” I said sullenly.

She looked over at Lu’. Lu’ shook her head, still seething but, like me, for now acquiescing in the rules which Cathy insisted on.

“So they paid their money and took their chances, and didn’t complain about the numbers that came out. Would you say they were more or less happy than women you know who never have come here, and almost certainly never will?”

There was a long silence, while Lu’ and I thought that one over. Finally, Lu’ agreed reluctantly, “They seem – well, if not happier, at least solidier, somehow, more real, I have to admit. Even the baby-cake dropouts and scared little nuns back up there on Level I are 50 times the women that just about everyone I ever knew back up there, outside the Club, ever dreamed of being. There’s an – an honesty about even the meanest, lowest of . . . us here that I’ve never seen anywhere before. And guts. And – honor. Integrity. It’s true.”

“It is,” I agreed. “They seem – would it be too trite to say that they seem far more fulfilled, somehow? Richer?”

“In what way?” The grim set of her mouth was finally fading. She was looking from Lu’ to me with something that suspiciously resembled approval.

“In the spirit, I guess you’d say.”

“Freer,” added Lu’.

Cathy’s head whipped around to look at Lu’. “Say that again.”

“I said, ‘freer’.”

“In what respect?”

“They don’t seem so – so *harried*,” Lu’ said, after thinking it over. “You know, the way almost everybody back up there –” she pointed “– is most of the time. Like they know something about why they’re here, what it’s all about, what they really want, something that anyone who’s never been here doesn’t know, has no idea of.”

“And will those others, the ones who’ll never come here – are any of them immortal?” she asked in that lethally gentle tone of voice. “Will not coming here guarantee they’ll be spared the risk of illness, grief, sorrow, pain, maiming, torture, death?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“So wouldn’t you say, perhaps, that even the failures here, as long as they do live, have it all over even the great success-stories of the world outside the Club who will never risk it here, or don’t even know about it?”

“Jesus, what a thing to ask!” I snapped. Then, surrendering, I said, “As far as I can see, though, I guess you’re right.”

“Ever been to the Grand Canyon, ducks?” she asked, seemingly off the point.

“Yeah, several times,” Lu’ said. I nodded my agreement.

“You looked at all those layers of rock, one on top of the other, a mile deep, from the pre-Cambrian layers ‘way down at the bottom of the canyon, or below it, up to the last of the Holocene deposits at the very top?” The question was rhetorical. Before either of us could answer, she continued, “Not one of the plants and animals and other things whose fossils you see there are still alive. All of them are dead, dead, dead – and in all but a few cases, their species, or even their family, or order, is long since extinct, as well. Yet among them are organisms whose descendants still exist, right down to present times. Including us. You and me, ducks, and all our world with us.

“They paid their money, in biomass and hope and effort – blood, toil, sweat, and tears – and took their chances at Mother Nature’s Genetic Roulette tables. Most of them lost the game, died out as whole biological taxa, not to mention as individual representatives of those taxa, ten times, a hundred, a thousand times longer ago than the coming into existence of the first recognizable human beings. Only a very, very few of them hit the jackpots and left descendants still with us today.

“– But do you think even the losers, if they had to do it all over again, would decide not to take that magnificent gamble, to lay it all on the line for the hope of spiritual immortality through their descendants, or at least as part of Mother Earth and whatever immortality Her children might have in the Stars someday?”

“No,” I said, now rather humbly. Lu’, looking both shaken and awed, shook her head in mute chorus.

“Ever been to Seattle?” she asked us.

“Hell, I lived there, as a kid, I was born there,” said Lu’.

“And I moved there myself oh, about seven-eight years ago, was living there the day we got a wild hare and drove out here and . . . started the Tour.”

“Ever been to the Seattle Aquarium? Or the Ballard Locks?”

Both of us nodded.

“And did you get to see the salmon going upstream, up the fish ladders? Going home to spawn and die?”

Again we nodded.

“Do you know what percentage, out of all the trillions of salmon eggs laid by salmon during their spawning-season, back up there in the headwaters of the Cascade Mountains, hatch out into salmon who go to sea, grow up there, and eventually make it back to those ancestral spawning-grounds? About one out of fifty thousand. – Or less.” A somber exultation radiated from her. “Just about the same as the percentage of women who come here, start on the Tour, and make it to the bottom. Not fair, is it? Cruel. *Horrible*.

“– It’s called ‘natural selection,’ ducks. It’s been operating on this Planet for almost four billion years. It’s a rigged game, all right. Unfortunately, it’s the only damned game in town, and you can either get in the game or throw it in and end up just one more extinction.

“Club Vesta is not and never has been a social-work agency. In fact, it’s like no civilized institution that’s ever been. The rules we have to play by here are Nature’s – Gaia’s – Mother Earth’s.

“We don’t particularly give a shit about maintaining, improving, or creating any form of civilization here. That isn’t the purpose of the Club at all. We don’t care one way or the other about society’s – any society’s – rules, except maybe those rules that are absolutely fundamental, common to all that lives, such

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as, ‘Thou shalt not burn down thy Planet.’ We are not here to do social work, we are not social workers, and frankly, we don’t give a shit, either.

“I know it’s cruel. And I know that by all the criteria of any truly decent, humane civilization, Club Vesta has no right to be. I freely admit that it is a place of absolutely free-wheeling, unbridled sexual promiscuity and perversion, sadomasochism, pedophilic dalliance, pornographic excess of every kind, hedonism carried to utterly pathological extremes, of torture, maiming, rape, murder, a place of evils and injustices of every kind imaginable or even unimaginable. We are so far beyond the Pale here that we might as well be in another universe, and I’d be an idiot if I thought you’d believe otherwise.”

“So what the fuck is the purpose of Club Vesta?” Lu’ snarled. She was nearly on the verge of tears again. “Can you justify its existence, then?”

Cathy looked from one to the other of us and back again, said, “You two are the first to make it this far in the last eighty years, did you know that?” As we sat there, staring at her, stunned into slack-jawed silence by the shock of her words, she continued: “The two of you might – just might, I said – possibly be able to reach Level IX and the Exit, successfully complete the Tour, more or less in one piece. – Out of all the tens of thousands who have preceded you since the last time anyone did the full Tour. And if you succeed in that, you’ll be able to answer those questions yourselves, as satisfactorily as anyone could for you.” Pushing herself upright once more, tucking a stray lock of hair back under her cap, she turned back to the cart, preparing to wheel it away.

“But Cathy –” Lu’ began, her eyes growing wider by the second in sheer stunned horror.

“Yeah? What can I do about it? Absolutely nothin’, chickees.” She started once more to take the cart away. Once again she stopped, turning back to us, and added, “Look, it’s like somebody once said about America . . .”

We looked question-marks at her.

“He said . . .” She tilted her head back, eyes closed, pulling up a memory with enormous care, as if taking out some priceless family heirloom to show to a new friend: “He said, ‘Like I told Hymie, back when we were still working our butts off to make it in that little place over the store in Chicago, the reason we came to America wasn’t because we were guaranteed to live happily ever after! We knew life would be hard here, maybe very hard, cruelly hard. All we asked was the possibility of a better life, one we could really have a chance to make for ourselves. Which was infinitely better than we had in Poland . . . where we had only impossibilities. America is not the land of milk and honey. I don’t think such a place has ever existed, anywhere, or ever will.”

“All America is, is the land of the possible. And that is what liberty is really all about – the difference between possible and impossible.”

I had no doubt, listening to her, that she was recalling a real conversation with eidetic precision. It was as if someone else were there in that room with us – someone weighted with a terrible cargo of years, and horrors, and maybe triumphs, as well.

“Who said that?” Lu’ asked.

“My great-great grampa. He came – well, fled, I guess is a more honest word – to America from Poland with his wife and baby son around the beginning of the twentieth century. Nobody remembers him now, except maybe us, his great-great grandchildren. But his kids, and some of his grandchildren, and their kids’s kids, have ended up changing the world, for better or worse. One of them, for example, my great aunt – great-grandmaw’s little girl, great-great grandpa’s granddaughter – was elected first Governor of Copernicus City on Luna, about ten years before I was born. My Mom was the second Governor of Mars – and First President of the Martian Confederacy, having led the successful Martian Rebellion against the United Nations that liberated Mars from its colonial status and made it a free and independent world in its own right the year before that.”

Lu’ and I looked at each other in horror. “A city on the Moon? People on Mars – a Martian state? Why haven’t we heard about this?!” I cried. The blood had drained out of Lu’s face, leaving it the color of ashes.

Cathy grinned. “By now, surely you know time runs a little . . . funny here, don’t you? You may have been here a little longer than you think, ducks!”

“Oh, no – Erik!” Lu’ whispered.

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“*C’est la vie*,” said Cathy. “– All right, then, chickees, here’s the deal: you may stay here in this suite, as long as you want to. Once you leave it for Parlor Two, though, you can’t ever come back. So . . . what do you want to do?”

“Erik!” Lu’ cried. “Oh, Erik, my darling – will I ever see you again?” she sobbed, in a voice so low I could barely hear her. Cathy had placed candles on the table for our meal; their light was reflected in pin-point brilliance, like tiny stars, from the tears that were starting from Lu’s eyes. I had already rushed to her side. Putting my arm around her protectively, I glared at Cathy, suddenly making up my mind. “All we want is another good sleep, breakfast, our clothes back, a quick bath, and some more trail-food. I think we’d best get on with it.”

Cathy was looking at Lu’ with profound sadness mixed with admiration and a puzzling, unexplained, bright green-hot flash of something like envy. “How about you, darling?” she asked Lu’. “Is this what you want?”

Pulling herself together with nearly unbelievable resolve so quickly that it was hard to believe that just seconds before she’d been on the verge of breaking down completely, Lu’ raised her head, glared up at Cathy with eyes like an angry lioness, and snapped, “Yes, it is. – Thanks, Esh’.”

“No sweat. I dig it. I . . . miss him, too.”

A grin lit up her face. “Tell you what, my dear: once we’re out of here, let’s go Mormon, okay?”

“?”

“Like, their connubial arrangements.”

“Uh . . . would you sign that one for me, darlin’ . . . in your own blood?”

“Why not? After all the shit we’ve been through together, I think I’d rather have you guarding my back than anyone else except Erik. I can’t think of a better way to keep you around than sharing the same dude with you. (And don’t tell me you wouldn’t give your back teeth to have a try at that dude – I’ve seen the way you look at him!) – Okay, Cathy, that’s what we want,” she said briskly, turning back to the other woman, who wore a very strange smile.

“All right, then. I’ll tell room service. There’s an intercom by the bed, there. Buzz me up after you wake up from your next sleep, and we’ll bring up breakfast, your clothes, all freshly cleaned, a full kit of trail-rations – and I’ll throw in some extra goodies. Like, a couple of palm-knives, some shuriken, a couple of Uzis, several boxes of ammunition . . .

“– No, don’t thank me. Not yet,” she added grimly, as we started to stammer out our thanks. “Really, it’s only fair – you’ll need ‘em all, believe me. I only hope it’s enough. – Well, good night, ducks. See you later.”

And, pushing the serving cart with its burden of dirty dishes and odds and ends of servingware ahead of her, she left.

Once the door had clicked shut behind her, Lu’ and I stared at each other in shock, once again blown away by a new understanding of just what this Tour of Club Vesta might entail.

“Shall I say it?”

“What, Esh’?”

“I’ve got a *baaaad* feeling about this . . .” we chorused together. Then we began laughing like loons.

Finally sobering up, I said, “Do you suppose she was kidding?”

“Have they repealed Murphy’s Law yet?”

“Yeah, you’re right . . . dammit. So what shall we do now?”

“As in right now? I don’t know about you, my dear, but I’m going to indulge myself in a little light reading before I rack out.”

“Like what?”

“Like, Rick McCammon’s *Swan Song*. I swore I’d read that thing cover-to-cover someday, kept saying I’d make the time for it, somehow. Well, time’s one thing we’ve got plenty of, here – I’m finally getting a chance to read the thing, and that’s what I plan to do.”

“To each her own . . . Okay, I’ve got some reading to catch up on, myself.”

“Oh? What?”

“John A. Puggsley’s *Accounting Made Easy* – well, I gotta have *something* I can make a living at once we get outta here – hey, stop!”

“Oh, you!” She picked up a sham from the foot of the bed and heaved it at me. Laughing, I ducked – and, of course, caught the next one she sent right after it full in the face.

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“Shit. – Well, piss on you, too, darlin’! – Actually, it’s *120 Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* – the unexpurgated version. And you don’t get to read it! Nyaahhh!”

She stuck her tongue out at me back. Then, both of us laughing – laughter loud and bright and near-hysterical, the release-valve for souls very close to the break-point – we went over to our respective backpacks, which stood with their frames propped up against the wall in a corner of the room, and got out something to read. She actually did pull *Swan Song* from her pack; my actual choice was rather anti-climactic, an old Del Rey paperback edition of *The Best of C. L. Moore*.

After a game but unsuccessful attempt to do some honest reading, we both gave it up.

“I’m for bed, Lu’. How about you?”

“Why not? I can’t get into this damned thing at all, tonight – I just read page 516 about 23 times. I damn near have that page memorized and I still have no idea what it means!”

“I think that’s a sign that it’s time to hit the rack – shall we?”

“I think you’re right. Here, let me get that main switch by the door, you get the one in the bathroom . . .”

We turned out the lights, and made our way to the bed by the light of a night-light low on the wall not far from the entrance. We crawled over the huge bed and got under the covers. I turned onto my right side, preparing to go to sleep. Suddenly, Lu’s arms encircled me from behind. She was trembling hard. “Esh’ – don’t, please don’t turn away, hunh?” The cracking of her voice betrayed her agonizingly valiant effort not to cry.

“Oh, Lu’, dear . . .” I rolled back onto my left side so that I could face her, sliding within her encircling arms without too much trouble. “Baby, are you all right?”

Burying her face against my breast, she made a muffled sound that might have been her answer. I reached up to brush her hair back, which, following its normal unruly bent, had fallen forward over her eyes again. Under my searching fingertips, I found her face covered with tears from the eyebrows down. “Lu’! Oh, honey . . . Luciferia, dear, what’s wrong?”

“Just hold me, okay? Please, Esh’ – hold me!”

“Of course I will, Lu’ . . .” I put my arms around her and pulled her even closer. “It’s all right, baby, I’m here, don’t worry . . . – Hmm?” I asked, when she apparently said something I couldn’t catch.

“Oh, God – Erik! I’ll never see him again! Erik!”

There was nothing I could say in reply. What Cathy had told us earlier in the evening concerning her family made it clear that the odds against our seeing Erik – or any of the others we’d left behind when we left for the desert that day – alive again, let alone hale and strong, the way he’d been when we’d gone haring off on that God-damned road-trip, was less than zip. – If Cathy’d been telling the truth. Unfortunately, I had a terrible feeling that she had been – or else, whatever the ultimate truth turned out to be about just how long we’d actually been down here already, never mind how much longer it would be before we could leave (or if we ever could leave at all), it might be far worse – and far, far stranger – than what Cathy’s remarks had hinted.

Just before we finally managed to flee into the kind release of sleep, once again I found myself looking down at the little I could see of Lu’s face, barely visible in what managed to reach us here from the night-light’s dim glow; there wasn’t much to see, wrapped as she was in the blanket clear up to her mouth, with her face pressed against my breast. I could just make out the bridge of her nose, her forehead, that wild, unruly mop of hair. Suddenly all these had become so very, very dear to me. Oddly, the fact that she might well be all I had left in the world now of family, friends, and community didn’t have that much to do with it. Nor were my feelings particularly sexual in nature. I only knew that I’d die – I’d murder, or torture, or maim – a million times over before I’d let her be hurt by anyone or anything.

As I dropped off into sleep, a vision of Cathy’s face rose briefly before me. She seemed to be smiling in approval. “Yep – you just may have a chance, you two, out of all of them,” I heard her say. Then the kaleidoscope turned, oblivion spewed out of it, and I was asleep.

\* \* \*

We awoke in the near-darkness that was all the night-light could give us, of course – there were no windows to admit the light of Sun and Moon this far below ground; and in private or semi-private rooms like this, whether the lights were off was up to the discretion of the occupants.

Lu' was still asleep. Gently, I scooted across the bed to the side, where, throwing both legs over the side, I let myself down to the carpet. From there I made my way around the bed and over to the bathroom. Walking on tiptoe in order not to wake Lu', who was still sound asleep, only her delicate, barely-audible snore coming from her, I entered the bathroom, found the light-switch, and turned it on. The soft, indirect lighting sprang on. Breathing a sigh of relief that the harsh incandescents above the sink – which easily gave off more than enough light to wake the dead, let alone poor Lu', still sleeping right in the path of that light as it would have come out of the bathroom into the bedroom – I performed my sacrifice to the great God Commode. Then, pulling off my robe – or sleeping-gown, might have been a better term – I decided to try to draw another hot bath for myself in that sumptuous sunken tub.

It didn't take me long to find the faucets that let the water into the tub, the temperature controls that kept the water hot once it was in the tub, or the switch that turned on the Jacuzzi. Soon, fragrantly-scented clouds of steam filled the bathroom, and the tub itself was rapidly filling with hot water, jets from the Jacuzzi making it into an artificial, indoors hot-springs.

Grabbing some towels and a washcloth from the rack by the sink, I went over to the tub, threw the towels onto the floor next to it, and, still holding the washcloth, made an unceremonious, if exuberant, leap into the tub, holding my nose like a kid jumping into the Old Swimmin' Hole in high Summer.

Soon I had lathered myself all over with rose-scented liquid soap from one of the dispensers set out in the step-back ledge on the tub's rim, and was preparing to sink down into the water up to my chin, lay back against the side wall, and spend a sybaritic half hour or so lounging there in the tub.

I had just begun to hum the tune from "Told the Judge" – or maybe it was "Half-Assed Drunk," it had been so long that I couldn't remember – when suddenly somebody hollered "Eeeeeee-haww! Last one in is a rotten sperm!" from the doorway. This was followed by Lu's spectacular cannon-ball jump into the middle of the tub, followed by a tsunami of hot, fragrant tub-water that nearly drowned me, and did cover the bathroom's tile floor with at least a half an inch of water. It was a good thing we'd moved our weapons and belts into the bedroom, into which the flood didn't quite reach.

"Aaaarrggghhh! Don't do that!" I screamed.

"Oh, don't be such a party-pooper," she teased.

"*Me* a party-pooper – hey, you hellion, you, I'll show *you* who's a party-pooper –" With which, I proceeded to begin splashing liberal amounts of water on her.

Soon we were engaged in a glorious water-fight, one that ruined whatever was left of Stella's good work of yesterday, so that my hair hung dripping like the tail of a drowned horse down my back and Lu' looked like a huge golden thistle caught in a rainstorm, and added another quarter-inch or so of water to the little lake which her cannon-ball jump into the tub had created. Fortunately, a drain in the floor near the sink was taking care of most of the problem, which was rapidly running out through the drain. But all the towels I'd laid so carefully next to the tub were now soaked. So were my robe, the throw-rugs scattered here and there over the tile floor, the light lavender toilet-seat and fuzzy toilet-seat cover, and anything else handy.

"Oh, man, this is such a mess!" I groaned, hanging on the tub rim, studying the disaster area.

"I guess it is kinda . . . disastrous," she giggled, taking the phrase right out of my mind.

"Well, I guess room-service can take care of it . . . I hope. Come on, kiddo, let's get out, let the water out, find some more towels and dry off, and get dressed. Then we can call for breakfast – and someone to do something about the Johnstown Flood, here, maybe."

"That sounds fine with me – even after that enormous meal we scarfed down before we went to bed, I'm still hungry. – Also, I gotta use the head."

"Okay, I'll go into the other room," I said, sighing.

"Still bother you?"

"Well, yeah. I guess it's one of those personality quirks you don't lose after a certain age. Old dogs and new tricks, and all that . . ."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I'll be done in just a minute . . ."

Eventually, between us we got the worst of the mess tidied up, started the tub draining, and turned off the tub's heater and the Jacuzzi. Then we dressed in our spare clean jeans, shirts, and underwear we still had stowed in our packs, plus our belts and other accouterments, minus only the boots which Cathy had taken to have cleaned and polished for us. After doing our teeth with a Water-Pik-style unit and two

individually cellophane-wrapped toothbrush-cum-Colgate combos thoughtfully left out for us on the counter top of the bathroom sink for us, we went back into the bedroom to call up Security.

Cathy had gone off duty. This time, our ministering, well-armed angel was a Colonel Collins, a petite young woman with an endless fall of luxuriant chestnut hair that might or might not have been real, and a Louisiana drawl so thick I could have made anoraks suitable for an Alaskan Winter out of it, ditto.

“Hi, y’all – want’cher breakfast, do you?” she asked, grinning a little too toothily for comfort. “Got just the thing – scrambled bill-collector, *paté de foi* IRS agent, fricasseed Congressional –”

“Oh, *please*, not at this ungodly hour!” I moaned. Lu’ gagged in agreement.

“I was jus’ gonna say, ‘fricasseed Congressional . . . Record,’ she sniffed, sounding hurt.

“Hey, who are you, anyway – Little Iodine gone Establishment?” I snapped.

“Why, no, sugar – I’m jes’ li’l ol’ Nancy, yer ob’t servant. I’m the one got the duty today. So, what can I do for you-all, hmmm? Besides breakfast, I mean?” She batted thick dark eyelashes at us, nasty little horns sticking out saucily from behind her carefully arranged halo like something worn by Next Year’s Model. “But seriously, folks . . . Okay, what would you like to eat? You can have anything –”

“– as long as it’s scrambled eggs!” Lu’ and I chorused simultaneously.

“As you say, seriously,” I added, “we had a huge supper before crashing. All I want is fruit, juice, toast, maybe – something light.”

“Me, too,” said Lu’. “I just want something to get my vitamins down with, and then get our laundry back and re-stock our trail rations and head out.”

“Gee – *eager*, aren’t we? – Well, if you say so. I’ll go get your breakfast for you, and someone to bring your things back, along with provisions. Back in a sec’.” She whirled on her heel and left before we had a chance to say anything.

Lu’ and I looked at each other, foolish grins on our faces. “Oh, well, Esh’,” Lu’ finally said, “‘Wotthehell’ . . .”

“– there’s a dance in the old dame yet! C’mon, let’s check our gear over, see what else we might need before we leave here.”

“Can’t hurt.”

We went over to our packs and piles of our guns, knives, and other weapons, to give them one last cleaning and a thorough going-over while we still could.

It was about a half an hour before Nancy returned, accompanied by another guard, both of them pushing service-carts before them. Nancy’s carried our breakfast – grapefruit halves, apple juice, toast, scrambled calves’ brains, coffee – on the top tier, our clean laundry and boots, the latter polished to a blindingly bright gloss, on the lower ones. The other woman, whom Nancy introduced to us as Colonel King, pushed a cart loaded down with enough supplies and provisions, it seemed, to have stocked a good-sized general store all by itself. There were baggies full of trail-mix; packets full of nutritional-supplements tablets and capsules, from the pan-spectrum mega-dose one-a-day jobs we both took all the time to everybody’s favorites, such as vitamin C and E; tanks of Gatorade from which we could re-fill our canteens and water-bottles; plastic baggies, labeled “fruit-juice concentrate – orange,” filled with orange powder; packages of strips of jerked meat wrapped up in saran-wrap; matches rolled up in sealed plastic packets; first-aid equipment, from rolls of bandages, thermometers, and Merthiolate, to packages of suturing equipment, hypodermic kits, and vials of pain-killers and antibiotics; useful gadgets such as nail-clippers, screwdrivers, small hammers, pliers, and wrenches; sewing accessories, such as needles, thimbles, and thread; the inevitable basic items such as combs, bars of soap, face-cloths, toothbrushes, rolls of toilet paper, sanitary pads –

“That reminds me,” Lu’ said to me, a strange look on her face. “Do you realize that neither one of us has had a period since we got here? . . . I know it’s been far too long, but I can’t be pregnant, and I’m sure as hell too young for menopause. What gives, Colonel King?”

“Dunno, sweetie,” the guard shrugged. “And please call me ‘Tabby.’ This ‘Colonel’ jazz drives me up the wall! – Well, why don’t you take some with you, anyway? You can always use them for first-aid, in pressure-bandages.”

Lu’ shrugged and, slipping some of the pads into a large baggie, stowed them in her pack.

We continued itemizing the goodies she’d brought: .40 ammunition for our Glocks, and my Firestar. .38 ammunition, for our “police special” snub-nosed revolvers. 9-mm ammunition, for Lu’s other Glock. Two Uzis, and ammunition and shoulder-harnesses for them. Shuriken –

“Goody!” Lu’ pounced on them. “Mine!”

“You bet,” I agreed. “I still haven’t learned how to use one of the damned things! – Let’s see, what else have we got here? . . .”

Finally, we finished rummaging through the cart’s treasures, having found what we wanted and stowed it away in our packs, or slipped it onto our persons, along with accompanying harness or holster or carry-pack. While there were plenty of things on the cart we both wanted and needed, from rolls of toilet-paper to spray-cans of pepper-gas, individually-sealed foil packs of coffee, and brand-new, French-cut panties in a variety of colorful prints in just our sizes, unfortunately there just wasn’t room for them, and we ended up leaving an awful lot of it behind. When Col. King, a kindly young woman, urged us to take all we wanted, we had to decline. “I’m sorry,” Lu’ told her, gazing wistfully at her cart and the heaped goodies it carried, “but it’s the weight, you see. If we should ever have to do any serious running between, ah, trysts or other refuges like this one, we’ll be cooked if we’re carrying too much weight. So no, much as I’d love to take lots of these other goodies with us –” She picked up a brand-new miniature Coleman stove, turning it over and over in her hands, looking at it as if it were the Hope Diamond. Sighing deeply, she set it back on the cart, longing in her eyes. “We just can’t risk it, dammit. But thank you.”

“No problem. I understand,” said Colonel King graciously. “Well, okay, now, how about all your laundry, and your boots? They’re over there, on Col. Collins’ cart.”

“And when you’re done with that, girls, I’ve got a nice hot breakfast waiting here for you!” Colonel Collins called from the side of the room, where she had been setting out our breakfast, while we’d been playing treasure-hunt amongst the things in Colonel King’s cart.

“Hey – I just realized: Why all these colonels? How do we rate?” I asked. “I mean, wouldn’t a couple of lieutenants, or even sergeants, have done just as well? This is like being waited on by the management of a big department store, instead of the flunkies. What gives?”

“. . . You’ll laugh,” said Colonel Collins, after thinking it over.

“Hunh?”

“Seriously, you’ll think it’s silly.”

“*What’s* silly, dammit?!”

“Well, like Colonel Moore may have told you, we haven’t had anybody on the Tour make it this far in a long, long time. Not only have you two actually made it here, but it turns out you have a lot of combat skills . . . We kinda wanted to see what you were like, thought maybe we could pick up some tricks or something from you – I mean, combat techniques, not the other kind of tricks, you know . . .”

“Learn anything interesting?” asked Lu’, rather waspishly.

“Yeah.”

“Like what?”

“Like, sometimes even Murphy fucks up . . .”

“Oh, gee, thanks!” she growled, as both of the other women burst into laughter.

“Come on,” said Colonel Collins, “let’s get this wrapped up. Breakfast is ready, don’t let your brains get cold . . .”

We finished loading up our packs with the supplies we’d picked out from Colonel King’s cart and stowing our freshly-cleaned laundry in them, as well. Then we sat down and tackled the food that Colonel Collins had laid out for us on the dainty little glass table.

I was even less hungry than I had thought; Lu’ had little appetite, as well. Both of us were all too aware of the possibilities that lay ahead of us to have much interest in food. We did get down the fruit, juice, supplements, and some toast, along with several cups of steaming hot, black coffee. But we weren’t able to eat more than that.

“Oh, dear,” sighed Colonel Collins. “And they were the very best brains, Igor! Well, maybe the cats will like them . . .” Carefully she scraped the uneaten portions of our meal into a ceramic crock, and stored it on her cart.

“‘Cats’?”

“I’ve got a couple of kitties who live with me in my place on Beacon Street – I don’t live on-site, you know.”

“You don’t? – No, I didn’t know, as a matter of fact,” I said. “Hey – how do you become a Security officer here, anyway? Or any of the other staff positions? Did you do the Tour?”



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“Yes, I did – a long time ago, sweetcakes! Now – well, I have to get the hell away from here for a certain portion of the time, or I’d go nuts! I started a garage-band as a hobby, just to take my mind off this place. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

“Uh . . .”

“S called the Vaginal Blood Farts. Greatest little garage band South of the Mason-Dixon . . .”

“– Okay, if you want to start as soon as possible, like you said, it really is time we got moving. Tab’, ol’ thing, can you call over and get someone to help you take the carts back and clean up here? I should be escorting our honored guests, here –” she gave the words a strange emphasis “–down to the next Gateway. – Oh, and could you make sure the stuff in the crock gets saved for Burke and Hare? They really do deserve a treat, this week, they’ve been so good!”

Colonel King, who was fiddling with something on her cart, grinned, made a circle with thumb and forefinger. Colonel Collins turned back to us. “Ready? Please walk this way . . .”

“Nooooo!” moaned Lu’.

“Hunh? I thought –”

“No, for chrissake – I meant the cornstarch!”

The two Security guards looked utterly blank. I cracked up. “Shit!” said Lu’ in disgust. “And here I thought I had you wired . . .”

Sighing, Colonel Collins said, “I think that was a present Cath’ left behind for me. Nuts. Well, I’ll just get her back later, I will. – Come on, now, you two, get your packs on, and let’s go . . .”

With her help, we got our packs back on, then followed her out the door. Colonel King gave us a sad little wave as we left, which didn’t calm my worries any.

Still, the sheer adventure of it all was beginning to take hold of me, hard. I was intensely curious to know what would come next. What would we see? What would we learn? Who would we meet?

## Down the Rabbit Hole

We followed Colonel Collins back to the foyer through which we’d first entered this suite. There, turning to the left, she led us to a new door, one of iron-bound oak, that stood at the side of the room, one of a long row of doors, all different. The only thing that secured the door were the heavy oakwood baulks serving as cross-pieces for it.

Beckoning to us to help her, with our assistance she got the crosspieces off, and swung the door open. Nothing, of course, had barred it from within, and it swung open easily.

Inside it was a little round room. Uncarpeted, its walls and floor made of unplastered, close-set stones, it was completely empty. There was a very, very old stain, the color of long-dried rust, about the size and shape of a human torso, on the dusty flagstone floor; smaller stains, each roughly the size and shape of a man’s foot – not one shod in boots or shoes, or even sandals, but rather in something like a shapeless cloth slipper of some kind – led straight across the room toward the wall ahead. And in that wall, to which all the tracks pointed – and the reason that everything in that room was so clear to the eye, in spite of the fact that it had no lights of any kind on within it, not even torches – was . . . a window.

I stared. Here was a window, where no window should ever have been at all, because of our tremendous depth below ground. Broad and low, it had deep purple velvet curtains, drawn back to reveal shutters. Those shutters might have been made of ivory – if anyone had ever braved the doors of the face, the lamps of the mouth of Leviathan to take it, for only such a beast would have been huge enough to yield such enormous, unbroken sheets of the stuff.

The shutters were unlatched, swinging slightly ajar. Upon them, again, was an ancient, smeary, rusty stain. It bore the shape of the outline of a clutching hand, fingers splayed across the edge of the shutter. A deep, lustrous violet light came through the crack between the shutters, which were not quite completely closed.

“Is *this* the way?” asked Lu’ incredulously.

“This is it!”

“Oh, the hell with it – who needs the damned dialogue at this point, anyway?” Exasperated, and tired of delays, I strode forward, into the room, up to the window, and with one irritated shove, pushed the shutters wide open.

## Pornography as High Art

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I barely heard Lu' gasp behind me. I could only stand, stock-still, before that window, staring through it with unbelieving eyes. Those ivory shutters had opened upon no dark stone hiding-place or secret tunnel of the sort which reason said must lie behind them, at these subterranean depths. They did not even reveal the sky of the dear, sweet, lost world of light and open spaces above us, say, transmitted down here via some technological trick, perhaps via remote television cameras over optical cable. Nor did they show us any scene from what, given our experience here, would have been likely anywhere in Club Vesta.

Instead, we found ourselves looking out upon a green woodland over which brooded a violet day, like no day we'd ever seen before. In paralyzed amazement I looked down, over the ledge, seeing not, say, another tunnel, angling sharply downward, toward Earth's heart, like the one we'd taken here from Parlor One of this Round of Level 7, or, for that matter, anything else I'd have expected to see there. Instead, below me there was a thick mossy carpet, replete with the tiny blossoms of grass-flowers and other woodland herbs growing in the moss, gleaming drops of water – dew? Or a recent shower? – gleaming in its interstices.

On that moss was no sign that any human being – or, indeed, any large animal or machine of any kind – had ever passed this way. Whoever it was had left those bloody footprints on the stones of the room at my back, that long-dried stain on the shutter, had passed through here so long ago that beyond this wall, Nature's healing Magicks had long since removed all signs of her – or his, or its – passage.

Clearly, this window opened onto Magick, utter weirdness, an avenue to strange lands and alien universes. But if we were ever to finish the Tour and leave Club Vesta, to have any chance to be reunited with those we loved, whom we'd left so far behind, we had to continue on down – and this was the only road there. So follow it we must.

I lifted my eyes from the untracked moss and stared out again through the dimness under the trees. It was a lovelier land than anything seen even in dreams, so lovely that it made my heart ache with its strange, unearthly enchantment – emerald woodland hushed and brooding in the hushed violet day. There was a promise of peace here, and forgetfulness, and rest. Suddenly the ghastly, clangorous, horror-filled rooms above us, and the dear, dead, well-loved community we'd left behind when first we entered Club Vesta and agreed to take the Tour, seemed very far away, remote and chill and ghostly. I moved forward and laid my hand upon the ivory shutter to my left, staring out.

Behind me, the sudden shuffle of Lu's feet, accompanied by a cough from Colonel Collins, awakened me from the growing enchantment that had begun to grip me. I turned. The dreamy Magick of the woodland loosed its hold as I faced Lu' and Colonel Collins once more, but still its memory lingered. I shook my head a little, meeting their wondering eyes. I nodded toward the open window.

“Well, Lu' – looks like this is the way we go. C'mon, darlin', we need to be on our way. Thanks, Colonel, for all you've done – y'all have been so kind to us!”

“Uh, yah,” Colonel Collins said, as if waking from sleep. “Sure you two'll . . . be all right from here on?”

Lu', coming out of whatever hypnogogic daze the sight of that dreamy day, so like the land shown in the Queen and Ace of Pentacles in the pirate edition of the A. E. Waite-Pamela Ryder Tarot pack, had put her into, turned to Colonel Collins and said, “No, my dear, but that really isn't the point, is it? Okay, Esh',” she said, turning back to me, “here I come –” Two long, bounding strides, and she stood on the sill beside me.

Both of us turned, now, to wave our good-byes to Colonel Collins. Her impish smile had died, replaced by a pale, sorrowful revenant of itself. We each raised a hand in farewell. She likewise raised a timid hand, less a wave than a gesture of despairing farewell. Suddenly, Lu' jumped down from the sill, ran to her, and placed a feather-light kiss on each of her eyelids. While Colonel Collins stood there in stunned wonder, Lu' turned and leaped back beside me. We started to turn, to leave.

“Wait!” called Colonel Collins. We whirled, to look back at her.

From a sheath at her belt she'd drawn a wicked-looking edged weapon, like a petite version of a Roman short-sword, but with a hilt of modern black electro-set plastic and a bright steel blade with an edge so fine it barely registered on the eye. As we stood side by side on the sill, solemnly she raised the sword before her and touched the point to her forehead in an ancient salute. “Ave,” she said softly. “Ave – atque vale.”

And then, tears starting in her eyes, tears that caught the purple daylight streaming into the room from the open windows behind us, so that they glinted like amethysts, she whirled around and ran back out of the room, slamming the door shut as she went. It sounded as if her breath had caught in a sob as she left; I couldn't be sure.

Lu' turned to look at me, her eyes haunted.

"Are you sure –?"

"Of *course* I'm sure, dimwit – this is the only way back to Erik!" she snapped. Suddenly all her fierce energy drained out of her. Her eyes becoming even more haunted than before, her shoulders quivering slightly, as if she were fighting collapse, she added, her voice haunted. "– If any."

I was suddenly certain that if we didn't haul ass down that mossy slope right now, we'd be stuck here forever, stranded at the entrance to Parlor Two of Round Three of Level 7 by our own indecision and failure of nerve. So, putting a hand at the center of her backpack to add a slight push to help her on her way, I cried, "Okay – let's go!" – and jumped.

She landed a split second before I did, the result of my push. Picking ourselves up off the thick, spongy, almost poisonously green moss, and making sure that everything was in order, we turned to look back at the window from which we'd just jumped.

We stared at it wordlessly for long minutes, a terrible sense of finality settling over us like leaden shrouds. Apprehension coiled in our guts like nervous rattlesnakes, constricted our chests, tightened our throats, made our saliva taste of acid.

I could have sworn, looking down at the moss, that at the point it reached the wall below the window we'd just jumped from, it could have been no more than about three feet below the window, four at the most, and that the ground it grew from was only a couple of inches below that.

Yet now we saw, staring back at the window, that the sill was at least twenty feet above the moss at the place where the moss was highest, and that, rather than rough-hewn stone, the wall separating the sill from the moss was a sheet of sheer, unbroken, glass-smooth steel polished to a gleam so high it made a very serviceable mirror. And from the base of the windowsill there now projected downward and outward a set of wickedly effective-looking spikes some three feet long each, shaped like long, long blades of grass with razor edges and cruel points, all smeared with some brownish, sticky substance which I knew instinctively was deadly poison.

"Well," I said, the first to finally break the awful silence, "that certainly settles *that*, doesn't it?"

Wordlessly, Lu' just turned and began trudging forward, down the hill, her body set in lines of resignation, apprehension, and determination. I followed behind, my every nerve alert to whatever new, unknown possibilities might come to us as we went.

Green and cool and lovely, the woodland spread itself before us. Gradually, as we went along, we relaxed, opened up to the enchantment that lay upon this gorgeous land. As I walked along at Lu's side, I thought that I'd have had to explore this great violent calm even if need had not sent me on this way, for there was a Magick about it that drew me on irresistibly.

Bird-songs trilled about us intermittently, and breezes stirred the leaves of the trees around and above us. When the wind blew, I thought that I could make out the echoes of a song from very far away; there was something subtly irritating about its simple melody, which seemed to seesaw endlessly up and down on two notes, idiot piping far away, as if at the ends of the universe. Underneath the nerve-twistingly thin, monotonous piping music that might have been that of a flute, there was the muffled, relentless hint of drum-beats, whispering of inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time. A vision rose up in my mind at the detestable pounding, piping music of gigantic, tenebrous, ultimate Gods dancing slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly in a terrible pavane – blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles, turning in idiot pirouettes somewhere outside time . . . I was unspeakably glad when the wind died and the song no longer shrilled and pounded in my ears, through my ears, all the way into my brain and guts and bones. The music had hinted of ghastly midnights of rotting creation, corpses of dead worlds with coldly glowing blue sores that had once been cities, charnel worlds brushing the pallid Stars, making them flicker low. Beyond those worlds, tittered the flute, were vague ghosts of monstrous things, half-seen columns of unsanctified temples resting on nameless rocks beneath space, reaching up to endless dizzy vacuum above the spheres of light and darkness . . .

Once more I felt impelled to stop and look back at the window we'd come here by. As I did, Lu' also halted, with a querulous, wordless sound of irritation. She followed my gaze – and the sound instantly died, stillborn, on her lips.

Chills ran down our backs. Behind us, along the way we'd just come, lay a heap of moldering ruins, moss-grown, crumbling into decay. A fire of incomprehensible heat had blasted and blackened those stones, long, long ago – it had to have been a thermonuclear fireball, for nothing less could have

accomplished such ruin. I could see that whatever the pile of heaped ruins had been originally, it must have been something huge, fortified, stately, and proud, like some vast office-complex in downtown Tokyo or New York City, perhaps, for its original lines, obscured as they had become over the centuries with green growing things and rampant fungi, were not quite lost. Out of all, only a part of one high steel wall stood intact now, covered by ruined, blackened, blistered metal that had been seared by heat so vast and all-consuming that in places, we could see, it had gone molten, bubbled up, even boiled away, leaving patches of scabrous, dead, gray rock naked to the violet sky. High, so very high up in that wall opened a window, and in it we could barely make out the white of ivory, like shutters. Or bone.

The lines of those moldering ruins, though nearly completely overgrown by rioting ivy, panic grass, feverfew, rock roses, mustard, and countless other wild herbs, as well as a revoltingly prolific collection of fungi of all shapes and sizes, every color of the rainbow, were hauntingly familiar. Making a little choking sound, Lu' started to step forward, toward the ruins –

Wings flashed in her face. A scream like a hawk's shattered the voluptuous air, leaving it raw and bleeding. Lu', reeling back, brought up her hands in a Weaver stance, holding her Glock –

Still screaming its wild, terrible cry, the bird flew away before she could take aim and fire. Afterimages of something closer to a snout than a beak, filled with numerous small, sharp teeth, danced in my brain. Though in general build and voice it had been very much like a hawk, its feathers had been deep cobalt, dark metallic green and purple, rich indigo, nothing like any hawk known, and the details of morphology and movement were, in many cases, disturbingly un-avian.

Experimentally, I made as if to step toward the rocks. A low buzz in the grass before me rewarded my efforts, just in time. I pulled my booted foot back as a flat, triangular head, the color of a violet so deep it looked as if it were covered in velvet, patterned with black markings, rose up in front of me, weaving back and forth on its long neck and the upper part of its body. The heat-sensing pits on either side of its snout took my measure as it turned its head this way and that, using them to greatest advantage. Great recurved fangs, venom pearling at the ends of their open, hollow tips, swung forward menacingly from the roof of its mouth. Its huge yellow, slit-pupilled eyes took me in with a terrible, unblinking stare. It rose up for about a third of its overall length from the ground, its body, intricately patterned in black, white, and gray markings, so deep a violet that it almost seemed to glow fluorescently beneath the violet Sun overhead.

I took another backward step, farther down the hill, away from the ruins. Lu' copied me. The snake blinked sleepily, almost as if it were amused at us, closed its mouth, and lowered itself back to the ground. Turning to one side, it glided away through the grass around us, and was gone.

I turned shakily to Lu'.

“Well, that, as you say, *is* absolutely and unequivocally that, I have to agree.”

She turned her lioness eyes on me. “Jesus, Esh', what have we gotten ourselves *into*?”

“Well, I guess we're going to find out soon, whether we really want to or not. Come on, let's boogey – I'd we rather we got the jump on it, before it does on us.” I turned once more and continued on down the hill, not waiting for her answer. Her reply was to follow me once more, this time looking about apprehensively, wondering just what sort of wildlife might be lurking out there – not to mention the possibility of tool-using sophonts.

A little path wound away under the low-hanging trees. We followed it slowly, alert to possible danger. Birds trilled drowsily in the leaves overhead, queer, unrecognizable songs like the music of no birds I'd ever known. The violet light was calm and sweet about us.

For a while, we paced along under the trees. Then abruptly the foliage ceased, the woodlands opening out into a broad meadow lying before us, deep, shimmering emerald in the clear, violet day. Beyond the meadow the slim shaft of a tower rose dazzlingly white.

From very far away, once again I thought that once again I caught the echoes of that irritatingly monotonous, two-note song I'd heard before. When the wind died down, and the music with it, I felt an oddly powerful joy, a lightening of a burden of dread I hadn't known I was carrying. It left me feeling almost dizzy with relief.

It was toward that tower that the path went. So on we went, along the path, out across the meadow. Far ahead I could make out purple mountains like low clouds on the horizon, and there and there in the distances clumps of woodland dotted the meadow. We walked on more rapidly now, somehow certain, without being told, that it was at the white tower that the next stage of our journey would begin. We must

have gone more swiftly than we realized, for the tower's great shining shaft drew closer and closer with an almost preternatural speed.

We could see the arch of its doorway now, under it an opening filled with a tenebrous violet shadow so deep it was nearly indigo, nothing visible within. The top of the tower's shaft was battlemented; I could see bursts of color between the teeth of its stone escarpment, as if a host of flowers bloomed there, spilling blossoms out against the tower's impossible whiteness. The singsong music had begun yet again; it was louder than ever, and much closer to us. My heart began to beat heavily as we advanced, wondering what would come next. Now the white tower rose above us, and we were crossing the little space before the door, peering in dubiously. All we could see within was dimness and crepuscular violet mist.

I laid my hand on the butt of my Colt .45 for the reassurance offered by its quotidian solidity and deadly efficiency, took a deep breath, and stepped boldly across the threshold of the opening under the archway. Lu', beside me, did the same, more or less simultaneously. In the instant our feet left the solid earth before that archway, I saw that this violet mist filled the whole shaft of the tower, that there was no floor. Emptiness engulfed us, and we left the solid, physical, Newtonian world behind us.

. . . We were falling through clouds of violet emptiness, in no recognizable direction. It might have been up, down, sideways, or through a time-warp. Everything had vanished in the violet nothingness. I knew an endless moment of vertigo and rushing directionless motion. Then suddenly, all in an instant, the reeling void was gone. We found ourselves now inside the tower.

We were staring into a broad, semicircular hallway, whose walls were lined with innumerable doors. We stepped inside and paused, looking around in bewilderment, wondering where to turn now. We could practically taste danger in the air, Magick hovering like mist over the whole enchanted place, the charge of Kundalini energy everywhere so strong that the very air seemed to vibrate faintly with it, as if the tower were a silver elf-bell struck by the Staff of a Magus to sound a Magickal melody for some exquisite Working. Little random prickles ran down my back as we went forward, slowly and with enormous care, staring around at the place we'd come to.

All about us were door-studded walls, enigmatic, imprisoning. There was menace, here, and the possibility of horrors worse than anything any Hell of Earth's religions could inflict – but only from here, through this place, was there any hope of ultimate escape from Club Vesta, re-emergence into the light, reunion with all those, all that we loved. Through what door would freedom lie? Through which doors lay doom? The dilemma we faced was nothing so simple as the lady vs. the tiger; we were about to attempt finding Lady Liberty among all the seductions of a virtual Paradise and the horrors of transfinite sets full of Hells – and all this endless multitude of doors were identical, scatheless, of mirror-bright steel set in steel walls, all alike, bearing no distinguishing signs, nothing to tell us which was which.

Above us, across the domed expanse of ceiling, there spread an enormous mural done all in shades of red, from the most virginal pinks, the rose of dawn's first light, to the deepest scarlets, the maroons and magentas of day's last moments and oncoming night. It showed a snake-slender, enormously powerful, black-skinned female hand armed with terrifyingly sharp, hooked, long crimson nails – the hand of Kali. The hand reached out to touch a fingertip to that of a winsome, innocent-looking, pale-skinned Eve, who held out her hand to reciprocate. Eve was surrounded by a seemingly infinite host of strange, alien beings. In Eve's right hand, she held something which, apparently, she meant to eat: the shape and color of a pomegranate, at second glance clearly it was a little universe in its own right, clouds of galaxies drifting through it like powdered mica or quartz. A brilliant ruby fire lay at its heart.

Behind us, someone said, "Vesta at large in the universe'."

We whirled to face whoever it was. "Who –?" began Lu'.

A woman, sweet-faced, slender, wearing a gown of simple cut but rich fabric – long-sleeved, covering her from neck to ankles, but with a plunging neckline, trimless, the cloth of which it was made a blue as subtle and varying as the ocean – stood there. Sandalled feet peeped from under the hem of her gown. She wore no jewelry save emerald studs in her pierced ears and a moonstone pendant on a silver chain, and no makeup save a hint of light pink lipstick. Her hair, cut level with her shoulders, was a rich auburn, with hints of white at the roots. She looked as if perhaps she had endured a long illness, for under her eyes were purple shadows, and those large gray eyes were weary, filled with sorrow, the eyes of a sufferer – and deep within them, like the first faint gleam of rose in a superheated steel plate, was a disturbing glint of something suggesting she had gone far, far beyond suffering into a universe all her own. "I'm – call me Alice," she

told us calmly. “You could say I’m a sort of . . . librarian. I’m from Yucatán – from the Quintana Roo. Maybe I can be of assistance to you – after all, I’m one of the women men don’t see.”

“Can you tell us the way out of here, uh, Alice?” I asked. From somewhere in the depths of my mind, The Jefferson Airplane’s “Go Ask Alice” flowed upward. I felt dizzy.

“All ways are the ways of freedom – and of bondage,” she said enigmatically. She grinned, now. She looks good-natured, I thought: still, didn’t she have awfully long, sharp nails on those hands? And weren’t those an awful lot of teeth showing in her grin?

“What the fuck does that mean?” snapped Lu’.

“Are you on the Tour?”

“Yeah, we are,” I said. “Look – could you tell us, please, which way we ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.” An elegant wave of her hand encompassed the endless vista of door-studded halls, curving out of sight where they stretched far to either side, an unknown distance away.

“Oh, gee, thanks,” muttered Lu’.

“It doesn’t matter which door we start with?” I asked.

“Not at all. You’re sure to get somewhere, if you only walk long enough.”

“Uh –” Feeling more than a little out of my depth, I tried again. “What sort of people are there around here?”

“In that direction,” she said, gesturing to her right, “there are humanoid aliens; and in that –” gesturing to her left – “there are non-humanoid aliens. Visit either you like; they are all mad.”

“But we don’t want to go among mad people,” I remarked, humoring her out of a feeling that this lady was more than a little mad herself.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” she said, her next words confirming my hunch, “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know we’re mad?” Lu’ asked her.

“You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Having an awful feeling that the only thing that would keep her from going berserk and trying to attack us was to keep her talking, I said, “So how do you know you’re mad?”

“To begin with,” she said, “a bitch isn’t mad. You grant that?”

“Uh . . . why not?” I said. Lu’ was staring at her with a very strange look.

“Well, then,” Alice went on, “you see, a bitch snarls when she’s angry, and wiggles her ass when she’s pleased. Now, I snarl when I’m pleased, and wiggle my ass when I’m angry. Therefore I’m mad.”

“Now, I’d call that a little funny, myself,” remarked Lu’.

“Call it what you like,” said Alice. “Do you play croquet with the Queen today?”

“I think this is getting entirely out of hand,” said Lu’.

“‘Croquet?’” I asked.

“You’ll see me there,” said Alice – and vanished.

As Lu’ and I stared at the place where she’d been, she suddenly reappeared again.

“By the way,” she asked, “what became of the baby? I’d nearly forgotten to ask.”

“It was turned into a very nice stew,” said Lu’ reassuringly, “and served up with the very best brains.”

“I thought it would be,” said Alice, and vanished again.

We waited for a few minutes, but she didn’t reappear. “Well,” said Lu’, “let’s get on with it – I guess she’s right about one thing.”

“What?”

“Any door here is as good as any other, as far as we’re concerned. So let’s –”

“Uh-oh . . .”

“What’s – oh, Lord . . .”

Looking up for a second at that fabulous ceiling overhead, I saw Alice, swinging from a long, wicked-looking, bright blue hook in the ceiling, near Eve’s foot, I hadn’t noticed there at all before. “Did you say ‘brains,’ or ‘trains?’” she asked Lu’.

“I said ‘brains,’” said Lu’. “And it’d be nice if you didn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly; it makes me dizzy just watching you!”

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“All right,” said Alice. This time, she began to vanish quite slowly, beginning with her feet, and ending with her grin, which now looked distinctly like a shark’s. The grin remained long after the rest of her had faded to invisibility and gone.

“You know,” said Lu’, “I’ve seen lots of madwomen without grins – but a grin without the madwoman? I’ve got a –”

“– *bad feeling about this!*” we both chorused, and cracked up.

Finally sobering, we remembered where we were – and our dilemma of before.

“Well,” said Lu’, there’s nothing to do but try the doors and see what we get, is there?”

“I’m afraid you’re right. Got any preferences?”

“Oh, the hell with it – let’s just have a look inside this one, here.” So saying, she strode boldly up to the door immediately in front of it. Like all the others, it had an oddly old-fashioned quartz doorknob, with large facets and an octagonal face. Reaching out, she took it in her hand, turned it, and pulled the door open.

A gust of wind blew in our faces, rattling the door. Dust was in that wind, and bitter cold. Through an inner grille of iron, locked across the opening, we could see dazzling whiteness, like sunlight on snow. Then Lu’ slammed the door closed. “*Brrr!!*” she said.

“Yeah, I didn’t bring my long undies,” I agreed. “Let’s try a different one.”

“Okay –”

She pulled open the door next to the first. This time, we were looking through another locked grille into a dimness of gray smoke shot through with flame. The stink of burning, of brimstone, calcined concrete, burning plastics and petroleum products, and charring flesh, assaulted our senses, making us gag. Faintly, as if coming to us from vast distances, we could hear the gut-wrenching sounds of agonized moans, the shivering echoes of screams of stark terror.

Shuddering, Lu’ slammed this door tight-shut again, as well.

“Let me try one,” I said.

“Rotsa ruck, Esh’ . . .” Shrugging, she stepped back while I went to the door on the other side of the first door and yanked it open.

We caught our breath and stared. Before us was a thick crystal door – all that separated us from bottomless space. I put my hand against the glass, yanked it away, fast – that glass was cold. Exposed as it was to airless, sunless space, it was a miracle that it hadn’t instantly turned my flesh into ice, so cold it was. We both stood by the window, staring out and down through it into bottomless gulfs of nothingness filled with darkness, silence, and the unwinking blaze of Stars. Suddenly, a long streak of light flashed across the blackness – then, all at once, it seemed to take on a spectrum of colors that included every one in the visible spectrum plus colors imagined only in nightmare, and in the instant, vanish from sight. It was not a meteorite – it was round, rimmed all about with lights, and from its underside had hung a smaller round pod. “To boldly go . . .” The phrase danced through my mind, then faded and was gone, like whatever it was that had just left a signature of sentience across the unconscious black gulfs of space.

The sight made me ill with sudden vertigo. Bottomless void reeled around me; I fell back into the hallway, Lu’ preceding me in a stumbling fall. I slammed the door on that terrifying glimpse into starry nothingness, hearing Lu’s moan of relief as I did so.

We couldn’t give up now. Taking just a few minutes to get over the nausea and chill that last door had given us, we went back to opening more doors. This time, we crossed and re-crossed the hall countless times, opening door after door, trying to find a place we could at least enter.

One door opened on a steaming Triassic rain-forest, filled with gigantic, ferny trees and strange shrubbery, out of whose deeps floated disturbing odors of rotting ferns and reptilian life and the distant bellows, whistles, and shrieks of unknown beasts. Upon the threshold sprawled something so frightful that my left hand flew to my mouth to meet the scream beating in my throat, my right going to the butt of my Colt. It was black – shapeless, slimy, and deep, dull black, a black that absorbed all light, giving nothing back, like a hole in space. It was alive. Like a heap of putrescently shining jelly, it lay there on the doorsill, looking like a vast, blind, amoeba. I knew, without being told, that it was horribly wise, horribly old – and very much aware of us, and amused at the horror it inspired in us. I slammed the door on it, gasping in relief as the latch clicked home, Lu’s harsh panting echoing mine.

Another showed us a gray desert that stretched flat and lifeless to the horizon, wan under the light of a huge, dim, red Sun in a strangely serene, deep, cool, ultramarine sky. A sense of utter desolation and

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weariness and despair seemed to flow from it to us. Far off across that desert danced a dazzle like a jagged twist of lightning – then Lu’ slammed the door, and we both leaned on it, panting in an instinctive, inexplicable terror.

And behind one there was an utterly indescribable thing in a world which so violated our eyes that we got no more than a glimpse of it before, in concert, we push the door shut on it again.

I was becoming terrified that none of these doors would open to anything we dared enter, that they were all death-traps of one kind or another – that we would go on and on and on down those halls, opening door after door, finding nothing but alien worlds totally inimical to us, finally starving or dying of thirst without ever finding a way out. But we had no choice. We had to keep on.

– And then came the jackpot: Lu’ opened a door from which came the sweet scent of tropical flowers, the rich odors of tropical rain forest. We found ourselves gazing through a broken grille of iron bars deep into a drowsy jungle of blossoms and scent and silence. The hole in the grille, which started at ground level and extended to a height of about five or six feet, was just large enough to allow either of us, pack and all, to pass through it. On its other side, we could see a path, beginning at the grille, running back into the jungle, vanishing behind the dense, damp foliage and the steaming mists that floated out of the jungle. Next to the path, just beyond the grill, was the stump of some large tropical tree, on the cut surface of which grew a number of strange clitoral fungi all the colors of weird; into the side of the stump, just below the cut, the words “Eat Me!” had been carved shallowly into the bark, moistly chartreuse against the olive-colored bark of the erstwhile tree, a thick sap running from them like tears.

“Well, what do you say?” said Lu’.

“Looks infinitely better than anything else we’ve seen so far . . .”

“Do you suppose it’s a trap?”

“Probably. Does it matter?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s go . . .”

Carefully, one at a time, Lu’ leading, we passed through the hole in the grille, taking great care not to tear our clothes on the rusty, ragged edges of the iron as we went. Then we started along the path.

Though we could hear the sounds of things very much like birds and insects, we saw nothing more than the plants. High above the great canopy trees spread out their leaves, shutting out the sky, creating a cool green roof over the world; leaf-drip, water slowly trickling down from above the canopy to the successive layers of leaves and branches below it to the ground, created a constant background music of delicate water-sounds, soothing and lulling to the senses. The path, about two feet wide, consisting of hard-packed earth, was completely free of all growth, but everywhere else grew lush tropical foliage in an almost solid mass in an n-color topological fantasy, trunks, branches, stems of uncountable species of trees, herbs, ferns, and fungi intricately, inextricably intertwined with one another in a vast ecological version of an insoluble Chinese puzzle. The few glimpses we got of the sky through the canopy of forest giants was a rich rose-purple, filled with a vast but oddly cool orange-yellow Sun.

We hadn’t gone too far when Lu’ suddenly said, “Hey – isn’t that a building or something up there?” She stopped and peered under her hand at a place farther up the trail, somewhere in among the trees.

I stopped and looked. “Yeah, I think it is.” A gleam of glass, yellow dazzle off metal could only be from something artificial. “Do you see any way to it?”

“There’s another trail leading off this one, up here . . .” So saying, she came to a fork in the trail. The main route curved to the left; a fainter, narrower track went to the right. “What the hell – let’s take it.” She turned right. I followed. Not long after, perhaps another 100 feet or so in, we found the entrance to a low structure, like a sort of metal-and-glass hemispherical bubble about 30 feet in diameter and standing about 10 feet off the ground at its greatest height, peeping shyly from among dense ferny growths and great tropical trees.

“Dere ain’t no place jist like dis place – so dis mus’ be de place!” she quoted gaily. “Okay – who goes first?”

As it turned out, the question was answered for us: the door, a sort of man-sized porthole or airlock consisting of an iris of overlapping metal plates, suddenly dilated. Behind it lay a metal-walled room not much smaller than the bubble itself; in the center of its floor was a round opening, down which led a metal ladder. Between it and us, in the doorway, was a young woman dressed – or undressed – in an outfit that showed off her creamy, light-brown skin and lovely figure to great advantage: black bolero top, tight black



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leather micro-skirt, red sandals, stud earrings bearing great glowing scarlet rubies in her ears, a necklace of rubies falling down into the cleft of her breasts, a huge, gorgeous ring in the shape of a winged skull, done in silver, human except that it had only one Cyclopean eyehole, in the center of its forehead, not two, the eyehole set with yet another ruby.

“Hel-lo!” she greeted us. “Are you candidates for the Tour?”

Lu’ and I looked at each other. Why not?

“Yeah, we are,” Lu’ told her. “Is this where we’re supposed to be?”

“If you’re here, it is,” the girl giggled.

“And if this is Thursday, this must be Oz,” I muttered to myself. When both Lu’ and the girl looked at me questioningly, I said, “Never mind. ‘Lay on, MacDuff, / Curst be he who first calls, ‘Hold! Enough!’”

“I like you!” the girl told me, beaming. “You’re weird! – Just right for the gentlemen here. Come on in, and meet the gentlemen from Arachnaria!”

So saying, beckoning to us to follow her, she di-di-bopped over to the head of the ladder leading down into the hole in the floor, swung around so that she was backing into it, and then dropped down the ladder so fast it was almost as if she had disappeared into thin air.

Lu’, ahead of me, turned to look at me; shrugging in answer to the look I gave her, emulating our newest guide, she went to the ladder and likewise dropped down the hole after the other woman.

Gathering my nerve, I took a deep breath and followed them down the ladder.

## 21. Scribe to the Gods:

### The Niche of the Creator of the Literature and Cinema of Horror in Today's World

All writers are agents of Hermes, the Messenger of the Gods. It is their gift and their duty, their niche in life to transmit to the world of mortals what the Gods have to say to us, Their warnings, blessings, commands, and other pronouncements. Those writers and cinematographers who are remembered and cherished as *great* are those who have met and transcended the call of duty, who have managed to bring alive for us the Will and Word of the Gods, make us *feel* these in our guts, our very bones. A writer, a director, an actor may be among the most pious and devout of the Godly, or a complete atheist – it makes no difference. Regardless of his or her religion or lack of it – or, for that matter, ours – it is when he or she somehow succeeds in transmitting to us communiqués from the terrible, great beating heart of the living world that Carl Jung called the Collective Unconscious and the ancients called Heaven that greatness blazes forth in pure holy white fire from his or her work, and we cherish it down the ages. Shakespeare, Dante, Sophocles, Euripides, Goethe, Marlow – these names ring down the centuries, kept alive in the hearts of millions, because their original owners learned the awe-ful Magick of emptying themselves out, making of themselves chalices to be filled with the will of Hermes, so that through them, He could give to humanity the Logos, the histories, comedies, tragedies, prophecies, commandments, and solace of the Gods.

The creators of the literature and cinema of horror have as their special task the fulfillment of one of Hermes most important and least-understood tasks: the transmission to Gods and humanity of intelligence from the Underworld. This is the realm ruled by Hades and His Queen Persephone, where dance perpetually Kali and Shiva, home to Hekate, Goddess of Witches, and all the other dark Gods of terrifying power and aspect, a place of refuge for all Gods who are outcasts and exiles in a world remade by later, conqueror cultures that subjugated or even destroyed their own. From the Greek Gods Themselves, Who, after the inception of Christianity, became strangers in Their own land, to the Gods of Voudon, the Nature-Spirits of Shinto and Taoism, the Gods of all peoples now outcaste or extinct because of the encroachments of others upon their lives and territories, the Underworld is filled with the undead revenants of primordial Powers made outlaws and exiles from Their own times and places by the pitiless, all-powerful Judges of the World, History and Selective Pressure. This is the realm of horror, of memories buried far below the light of Awareness because they were too terrible, too damaging to bear. This is the realm of Charles Fort's "damned ideas," ideas too disturbing, too potentially disruptive and philosophically seditious for society to tolerate. Herein wander the weeping ghosts of Wounded Knee, of Birkenau and Belsen, of Hiroshima and Chernobyl, of Tiannen Square and Waco – and all the countless ghosts of terrorized tortured and murdered children, of the men and women whom they might otherwise have grown into. Here are the liches and rotting cadavers of all the worlds of If, of Might-Have-Been.

. . . But this is also the realm of Magick, in all its Power and Glory. Here is Hekate's Well, from whence springs Kundalini energy, the unlimited fountains of the energies of raw space itself, the fuel of Magick more potent than the energies of supernovae eruptions and exploding neutron stars. For all the effort spent by the living, daylight world in pressing down into darkness all those disturbing ghosts of Truth, lest they return to the light and take their revenge on their tormentors and murderers, pulling down the temples of Business as Usual in the name of Justice, is stored there, down in the Underworld, as in a vast battery, only waiting to be tapped. Those whose lifework is the production of literary and cinematic horror are vessels of transmission of the communications of Hermes from the Underworld, where He goes and from whence He returns to the living world and the realm of the Gods in His aspect of Psychopompos. Along with source-material for their work, they tap that unspeakably powerful energy, occult wildcatters drilling into the bedrock of the psyche in an all-out search for the true black gold of infernal power, esoteric miners raping the Tunnels of Set for dragons' hordes of Magick. Yeats' horrific Rough Beast comes at their call, bearing on its back the Treasures of the Magi; as it gives birth, they steal its cubs, to hand-raise as their very own domesticated Toltacz horses, Pegasi, and Unicorns.

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It is Hermes' job as Psychopompos to conduct the souls of the newly dead to the Underworld, and to guide the souls of those about to reincarnate back from the Underworld to the world of the living. Likewise, He shepherds thoughts, ideas, feelings, and memories along the roads that interconnect Heaven, Hell, and Earth. The producers of the literature and cinema of horror act as His agents in the gargantuan, dangerous, dirty job of bringing these swarming denizens of the Inner Planes – the world of feelings, memories, ideas, and intellectual structures – back up from the Underworld, whence, out of reaction, repression, neophobia, and addiction to *Gemütlichkeit*, they were banished by the living, to the realms of Light and Life, Earth and Heaven, once more.

Sophocles, Dante, Euripides, Goethe, Shakespeare – these are remembered as truly *great* because they, in their time, gave the last full measure of their devotion as vessels of transmission of the Logos from the Gods to the world of men – particularly its less pleasant aspects. In fact, so well did Sophocles carry out that task when he wrote *The Trojan Women* that he was almost lynched for “sacrilege,” i.e., daring to bring to his audience those aspects of the Divine Word that they did *not* want to hear! Dante danced dangerously close to the line dividing “genius” from “heresy” in his *The Divine Comedy* – and, as a result, escaped the stake only by getting out of Dodge just ahead of a Papal posse. The stunning vistas in the works of the painters Bosch, van Eyck, Memling, Brueghel, and others of the Flemish school, showing in fine, agonizing detail Earth, the Last Judgment, and Hell, overwhelm even the staunchest of modern atheists with their sheer power – the raw spiritual power that springs from the very bedrock of the Collective Unconscious, the realm of Hades and Persephone. These, and all the other writers, painters, sculptors, and other artists whom we remember as *great* infused their works with that same terrible, terrifying power. Whether their subjects were Heaven, Hell, or even the dear, ordinary, quotidian world of work, home, and holiday festival, their works are windows on the realm of the Universal, the Gods, Children of Chaos Who, through Their acts and by Their Word, make and unmake all things.

Is the time of giants long past? Has that *kind* of greatness – the power to confront us with a cruelly clear, undistorted view of the very bowels of Hell itself and make us, if only for a short time, accept it as *real*, and of overwhelming importance in our lives, perhaps more important than anything else – passed out of the world?

Not at all. Consider the works of Salvador Dali. Or of H. P. Lovecraft. Consider Abraham Merritt, the pulp writer, whose works, however vulgar their medium, have the same shimmering, raw vitality as the paintings of Dali or Brueghel. Consider C. L. Moore, whose short fiction, particularly her stories of Jirel of Joiry and Northwest Smith, in many cases has, for all its flaws, the same overwhelming power as Dante's visions of Heaven and Hell. Consider Akira Kurosawa's stunning achievements in film, such as his *Dreams*, or his *Castle of the Spider's Web*, which dissolve the barriers between East and West, Heaven and Earth, Earth and Hell.

The roll-call could go on and on – right on down to today. Consider: Stephen King, who fulfills *exactly* the same niche in our culture as Shakespeare did in his. You can argue any way you want concerning the “cultural level” of King's works – in most cases, clearly *haute couture* he ain't, as the King himself has cheerfully admitted again and again. But that is beside the point: he does for us what Shakespeare did for his time and place, presenting the universal to us in the guise of the everyday, transmitting to us in enthralling ways the Word and Will of our Gods, Their true histories, Their comedies and tragedies, Their pronouncements on what *shall* be.\*

\*Shakespeare isn't always the most well-bred of authors, himself. His works especially suffered the attentions of the well-meaning literary castrator Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) because so many passages in them were, to put it delicately, “unsuitable for family entertainment and edification.”

Consider R. R. McCammon, who has done for us with his *Swan Song* what Dante did for his culture with *The Divine Comedy*, and John Bunyan for his with his *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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Consider John Skipp & Craig Spector and their *Books of the Dead*, and George Romero and his series of films beginning with *Night of the Living Dead*. These are tours of the nastiest possible parts of the Underworld – exposing unto the light all those things we like least, hate most about ourselves and life itself.

Consider all those who currently produce or participate in works literary and cinematic horror who are widely known and cherished, from writers such as Kathy Koja, the aforementioned Stephen King and R. R. McCammon, to directors and producers such as Romero and Cronenberg, to artists such as Michael Whelan, to actors such as John Englund, Christopher Lee, and Frank Langella. These are the modern high priests and priestesses of Hades and Hermes Psychopompos, who bring to us the Logos of all the dark Gods and Goddesses, force us to confront all the things we'd really rather pretend didn't exist – and make us come slaving back for more, again and again and again, shelling out enough \$lack each year for it to pay the national debt ten times over and then some!

Let us take good care of these, our conduits of communication with the darkest of the dark Gods. The sons and daughters of some strange midnight mating of Hermes Trickster and Cassandra, somewhere behind the back of Apollo, brothers and sisters of Dante and Marlow, Euripides, Bosch, and Michelangelo, these writers, artists, actors and actresses, producers and directors, musicians and dancers keep us honest. When we would murder truth, torture it to death after forcing it to sign over all its worldly goods to us, stuff it in a coffin, bury it far below the light of Awareness, they exhume its dead, rotting corpse, force us to take part in its autopsy and the forensic analysis of its manner of death, push us writhing right up to the putrescent remains and shove our faces in them, so that we cannot take refuge in denial. They are its Psychopompos, guiding it back to the world of the living once again, there to have the justice of the Gods.

So let us drink a toast – of course in the finest type AB+! – to these, the priesthood of Hermes Psychopompos, Hades, and Persephone! For without them, we would finally kill all our most important truths for good – and, along with them, all the Magick that was ever in us. . . . Not to mention becoming bored stiff (heh-heh-heh!) in the bargain, without all our dear, undead nemeses of stage, screen, schlock paperback and splatterpunk bloodzine ready at hand to keep us bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and permanently insomniacal . . .

## 22. A Litter of Little Foxes: Dreams of the Abandoned

A legion of us there are,  
Like a vast litter of little foxes,  
Each kit whelped in a different thicket  
By an indifferent, hateful dam who,  
After throwing her last whelp,  
Disappeared,  
Walking through a hole in time and memory.  
Over all the bitter years since,  
Each of us, passing someone in the street,  
Has turned, eerie recognition dawning,  
Incestuous craving rising suddenly,  
Triggered by the mysterious familiarity  
Of a walk, a voice, a gesture, an attitude  
Whose ideals are finally remembered  
Upon returning home once more  
To the soul's mirrors of day and darkness.  
And once more, one realizes  
That one has again seen  
Another of one's womb-mates,  
Another of the little foxes,  
Now grown, somehow having survived,  
And of the same, strange, orphaned breed  
That begat one's own soul's birth . . .

\* \* \*

And the sea-green eyes of the fox  
Are so deep that sometimes they reveal  
Abysses beyond the nature  
Which a daylight God would give,  
As if that little animal  
Were a living telescope  
Housed in some strange, animate tracking station,  
Its lenses trained upon the waters  
Of some other world.

\* \* \*

There is a vast, uncharted ocean  
Whose far shores are not Earthly ones,  
Lit by light not of our Earthly skies,  
Onto which we, the little foxes,  
Are clumsily shuttered windows –  
Look through any one of us  
On those rare occasions  
During which those shutters  
Are opened, so furtively,

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And you'll see those dark, rolling waters,  
Violet with longing and indigo with pain,  
Filled with creatures stranger  
Than ever followed the armies of the Moon,  
At whose bottom lies treasure  
Hidden in the Sunken hulls  
Of ships that have sailed no Earthly seas,  
Treasure beyond telling,  
Guarded by nightmares and demons  
And horrors beyond all Earthly ken.

## 23. A Hole in Time

### From Volume 1, Book 4 of *Dragon Drive*

Monday, May 13

#### Chapter 1: Whether Report

“Hey, that tickles!” I protested, coming muzzily awake to find Monty blowing in my ear.

“How’s this feel, then, darlin’?” Monty whispered, nibbling on my earlobe as he ran his hands between my thighs, parting them.

“Ohhh, Monty . . .”

Then he was deep in my body and my soul, and I was swept away in a tsunami of bliss.

When at last we had spent ourselves, and were lying content in each other’s arms, I asked him, “What time is it now, do you think?”

“Prob’ly around 6 or so – looks like the Sun’s been up for over an hour.”

I looked up at the rectangle of lucent blue above the bed. “Why are you awake so early?” I asked him.

“I gotta get ready for work, an’ so does Leroy – I wanted to see him afore I left for work. An’ Leah needs a checkup. She hasn’t been feelin’ well the last few days, you know, an’ she looks a mite peaky. I’m thinkin’ she might’a caught some bug or other. I want to call down to Medical an’ get her an appointment now, so if’n she does have somethin’, they can clear it up afore she an’ Paul leave for the drive.”

“As usual, we’re both on the same page, sweetheart. That sounds like a great idea. Want me to wake her up while you go make that call?”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” he said, sitting up and swinging his feet over the side of the bed. Grabbing his robe off the hook by the door and putting it on, he said, “I’ll escort her down there on m’ way to work. Then I’ll have ’em call me at work when they’re through givin’ her a checkup, so’s I can escort her back up here.”

“You really think there’s a possibility of ambush or something for her?”

“Baby-Girl, I am not takin’ chances with any o’ you! I don’t even like Paul goin’ about on his own, though he’s got the trainin’ an’ the skill to defend himself. So does Leah, but – well, let’s not take chances, okay?”

“Take chances with what?”

“Leah, you’re awake!” I exclaimed, startled.

Yawning and stretching, she said, “Yeah, I am.”

“How do you feel?”

“Actually, pretty good. The headache’s gone.”

“Leah,” Monty told her, still standing in the doorway, “I want you to have a checkup today. I’m gonna call down to Medical an’ have ’em work you in today. I’ll take you down there, an’ then I’ll have ’em call me afterwards so’s I can come get you an’ escort you back, just in case. Until we get this bidness about Canela an’ Accountin’ cleared up, better we should all err on the side o’ paranoia.”

“I – oh, heck, I don’t need a checkup, the headache’s gone and I feel fine!” she said, irritated.

“Yeah, but you’re goin’ on the drive with Paul in a few days. If’n you do have somethin’ now, let’s find out what it is an’ get it cleared up so you’ll be fine for the drive.”

“But –”

“Leah, I want you to do this, hear? I’ll have it put on my insurance – I already put you an’ Paul an’ Leroy on it the other day, so’s you won’t have to pay for it yourself.”

“But Monty –”

“Leah, you’re gonna do this for me. Now mind me, hear?” he said in a voice that brooked no resistance.

Grinning wryly, she told him, “I don’t seem to have much choice, do I?”

“No, ma’am, you do not. Okay, you get dressed, take a shower first if’n you want, an’ then come on out to the kitchen an’ we’ll have some breakfast.”

“Yes, sir,” she told him, sighing, as she sat up and started to crawl down to the foot of the bed between me and Paul.

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Paul, who'd been lying there beside her, snoring gently, throughout this exchange, suddenly stopped snoring and opened his eyes. "What's going on?"

"I want Leah to get a checkup today, find out what's wrong with her," Monty told him. "Mebbe it's nothin', but mebbe she's got a bug or somethin', an' if'n she does, it should get cleared up afore the two o' you take off for Socorro."

"Oh. Okay – uh, when's she gonna have the checkup?"

"This mornin', whenever I can get her slotted in with somebody down at Medical."

"I've got a session with Yuri this morning, you want me to take her down there?"

"I'll do it. You've got a fixed appointment. I don't have to turn up anywheres at any given time in particular today. I'm goin' to my office, but that's on my own schedule. You go on down, have that session with Yuri, get in some dojo practice, mebbe some range practice, too. I want you in top shape for the drive, too."

"Uh, if you say so. What time is it, anyway?"

Taking his watch off the top of his dresser, Monty looked at it. "6:45. Time to rise an' shine."

I ended up taking a shower with Leah and Paul while Monty called Medical to make an appointment for Leah. Then, while Monty showered, Leah and I made breakfast for all five of us – by the time Leah, Paul, and I had showered and gotten dressed, so had Leroy, who by then was more than ready for breakfast. When Monty came back out again, breakfast was on the table, consisting of scrambled eggs with non-dairy creamer added, bacon, toast, and fruit juice.

"Looks good," Monty commented as he took a seat next to me.

"Leah made most of it, but I twisted her arm and she let me pour the juice," I told him.

"You're a good cook, gal," Monty told Leah as he spooned some eggs onto his plate and helped himself to the platter holding perfectly cooked strips of bacon.

"Thanks," she said, smiling demurely, eyes downcast.

"Did they make the appointment to see Leah?" I asked Monty.

"Yeah. They want 'er down there at 9 a.m. I can get 'er in early, but they said no later than about 9:10 – they've got a heavy caseload today, for some reason. I think they said somethin' about a new bug goin' around, a variant o' the 'flu."

"So you'll be leaving with her soon?"

"Well, soon as she an' I have eaten an' have had a chance to let our food digest."

"Daddy?"

"What, son?"

"You know those texts on the Centaurs, trans-Neptunians, and so on you promised Baron Ransdell? I'd like to scan those for you, if that's okay. It'd give me a chance to look over the material, too."

"Sure, son. You know where all that stuff is in the library?"

"You've got all the esoteric stuff on one set of shelves in there. It looks like it's arranged by subject, and then, within subject, by author's last name."

"Yep," Monty told him, smiling fondly. "You don't miss nothin', do you, Leroy? Okay, go ahead an' scan whatever you want to – I think our scanner up here'll work fine for that, but I'm not too sure how the color scans'll come out. You might want to try diff'rent settin's for color – the diff'rent True Color settin's, 256 color, an' so on. We've only got about a zillion blank ZIP disks here from the batches Pat Wall's sent down from time to time, so go ahead an' help yourself to 'em, just put all the ones you're storin' stuff on for Rich in one box. There's labels in the desk in the study there you can use for the box, an' the ZIP disk labels are in the cartons they come in.

"An' if'n you're gonna do that, you might want to scan Frater Albertus' Alchemist's Handbook whilst you're at it – I don't know if'n Missus Ransdell has that, but if'n she don't, it may come in handy for 'em.

"Also, you might copy the stuff I've got on disks labeled 'New Qaballah' to fresh disks, because it goes over the relationship between Magick an' astrology, Magick an' alchemy, astrology an' alchemy, an' a lot of other stuff that Rich might want to have on hand. That's just a straight copy, no extra work."

"Do you want me to run off those specimen charts for him, too?"

"If you'd like to."

"I made a list of people for that – the ones whose charts ought to have strong placements for the Centaurs and so on. Like Crowley, Lovecraft, Hawking, and so on."



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“Make sure you do Jack Parsons’, too – there’s a wealth o’ fascinatin’ stuff in it you should see. There’s a book in the library called Sex and Rockets that has Parsons’ birth-data in it, I’ll copy that out for you. (The material in that book is kinda heavy, you want to wait on readin’ that’n for a few years.)”

“Anyone else?” Leroy asked, taking a notebook from his pocket and jotting into it.

“Yeah, uh, let’s see . . . Sir Winston Churchill, Admiral Resh, Nick Herbert, Eugene Shoemaker, Nikita Khrushchev, Golda Meier, Adolph Hitler, Salvador Dalí . . . There’re a lot more. Lemme think about that one between now an’ Friday, when The Wall’s due to arrive. He should have the programs I asked him for with ’im, includin’ the good astrology programs.

“Now, you sure you want to do that? I can always have it done down at the big library.”

“Naw, it costs too much to have them do it, and this way, I get a chance to learn more about those subjects.”

“That’s my boy, a totally balanced outlook – from the most exalted o’ subjects to how to avoid grand larceny!” Monty said, chuckling. “Okay, if’n you want to. But if’n it gets to be too much, let me know an’ I’ll have Diablo Publishin’ take care of it. – Okay, Leah, anythin’ you need to do before we leave?” he said, laying down his napkin and getting to his feet.

“No, I’m fine. – Paul, could you –?”

“Sure, honey,” he said, getting to his feet to allow her to get past him.

“Darlin’, I’ll be back after a while with Leah after she gets done with her checkup,” Monty told me. “Anythin’ you want me to pick up at Stores or anythin’ on the way back?”

“Oh, Lord . . . Well, we can always use more fruit, and maybe you could pick up some chocolate chips so we can make cookies. And eggs. Heaven knows, we go through eggs like I don’t know what.”

“Any particular kind o’ fruit?”

“Oh, whatever looks good to you and Leah.”

“Sure. Okay, darlin’, we’ll be back later . . .” Giving Leroy a quick kiss and a hug, then kissing me, he headed for the front door, Leah in his wake. At the door, he and Leah belted on their guns, then headed out the door to the elevator, shutting the door behind them.

“What time’s your appointment with Yuri, Paul?” I asked him.

“8:30. – Uh-oh, I’d better be getting down there, myself,” he told me, looking at the kitchen clock. Rising to his feet, he said, “Any errands you need running while I’m down that way, Batrix?”

“Can’t think of any. Just – be careful, okay?”

“Sure, beautiful, I will,” he told me, smiling. “You be careful, Batrix, dammit,” he said, suddenly becoming serious. “Don’t leave here for anything short of Monty or me calling you or some sort of all-out disaster, hear me?”

“Now you sound just like Monty,” I told him, laughing a little.

Coming around the end of the table, stooping over me, he leaned down to give me a kiss – and not a mere peck on the cheek, either. Then he, too, left, leaving me feeling a little dizzy in his wake.

“Don’t worry, Mom, he loves Daddy and Leah, too,” Leroy told me, smiling.

“I know,” I said, feeling even more unnerved, worried that, with his Talents, Leroy was observing too much of our private lives. As if he read my mind – which he probably did – he said, “It’s okay, Mom, I already know about that stuff, and I put up a shield when you go to bed and, you know.”

“Oh, Leroy,” I said, giving him a hug, “you’re such a . . . a knowing young man. I just hope we can do right by you,” wondering to myself (?) if our more than slightly dotty household could give him what he needed.

Hugging me back, Leroy said, “You do. All four of you. – Mom, I gotta go start my work, okay?”

“Sure, Leroy. I suppose I should do mine, too – I really need to do some housework, like dusting and vacuuming and so on.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later. I’ll be in there, working on my computer, if you need something,” he told me as I stood up to let him by me and he scooted off the bench, got to his feet, and headed for his room.

For the next couple of hours I dusted and vacuumed, using the powerful little vacuum cleaner Monty’d gotten from Stores for us five years ago, when they first started importing them from San Bee. It had all sorts of useful attachments, including a dust-sweeper that went on the end of one of the long wands that attached to the machine’s intake hose, which I used to good effect in the library, front room, and master bedroom. Then I began on the carpets we’d laid down in the front room and the bedroom, as well as the

wooden flooring beneath them. I was just finishing up when the front door opened, admitting Leah and Monty.

“We’re back!” Leah called.

Hurrying into the front room from of the bedroom, where I’d been rounding up the last of the lint-bunnies with the vacuum cleaner, I came out to find them hanging up their guns. “How’d it go?” I asked them.

Leah looked mutely at Monty in a silent appeal for him to tell me, rather than her having to.

“Doctor says she’s fine,” Monty told me as he set two big grocery sacks down on the front room table.

“Well, that’s wonderful!”

“Yes, but – but what’s wrong with me?!” Leah cried, bursting into tears. “Why am I like this, dammit?!”

“Here, hon’, you go sit down here on the couch,” Monty told her, gently urging her to take a seat. Sitting down beside her, putting an arm around her, he told me, “She didn’t have a noticeable temperature or anythin’. They did a blood draw for a panel, they’re gonna check to make sure, but the doctor thinks it’ll all come out negative. He thinks she might have some sort o’ temporary imbalance in her endocrine system which is doin’ this. He says it ain’t that unusual, ’specially in young women who’ve never had a child, even for healthy women. He’ll call us as soon as the results from the panel are back if’n anythin’s really wrong, but he don’t think there’ll be anythin’ like that.”

“So why am I like this?!” Leah wailed again, tears pouring down her cheeks. “I can’t concentrate, I can’t do squat as far as dojo training goes, when I try to do my artwork it goes all funny – is it all in my mind? Am I going crazy?”

“No, no, no,” Monty told her soothingly, kissing the top of her head, gently pulling her head down to rest against his chest as she continued to sob. “No, you’re not goin’ crazy. Women go through this sometimes, that’s all. Part o’ the equipment that comes with bein’ female. Now, I’ll admit I’ve known some men who regularly came down with PMS, but it’s a diff’rent kind o’ PMS.”

A tentative, muffled giggle made its way through the tears. Monty went on: “Now, just in case it’s some low-grade viral thing that the doctor didn’t catch, an’ you come down with it again on the drive, Pharmacy’s gonna send along ever’tthin’ needed to take care of infections, includin’ gallons of industrial-grade hydrogen peroxide, all the fresh garlic in the world your neighbors for 50 miles downwind can stand, colloidal silver, vitamin C, homeopathics, an’ a whole bundle of allopathic stuff. I’ll even make sure they include some lollipops to give you if’n you’re good in the medic’s office.”

Another muffled giggle.

“Now, don’t worry, Leah,” he told her. “If you don’t feel good, just go in an’ lie down. You’ll be all over this by the time you an’ Paul go to Socorro, whatever it turns out to be, okay? It’s okay, just rest, do what you need to do. An’ if’n you feel like cryin’, it’s all right – Lord knows, up until now, you’ve hardly ever cried at all in all the time I’ve known you since you first come to the Keep, even though you’ve had more reason than most to do so. You may be just makin’ up for lost time. If’n you get like this on the drive, all you have to do is go back to the dorm room you’ll share with Paul – I’ll make sure the two o’ you have a big room all to yourselves, like me’n Batrix will – an’ cry all you need to. Paul or somebody can lead your horse whilst you’re doin’ that, or stable it in the barn-wagon. Tell ’em if’n they don’t like it, just come talk to me, an’ I’ll give ’em an earful.”

“You mean that,” she told him wonderingly.

“You bet I do, sweetie!” he said. Then, kissing her on the forehead, he asked her, “How do you feel right now?”

“P-precarious,” she said, stuttering a little.

“You wanna go lie down for a while? Or just read or somethin’? Whatever you wanna do, it’s all right.”

“I . . . think I’ll go do some stuff in my room, the one Paul and I have. Maybe move some furniture –”

“Oh, no, you don’t! I can help you with that tonight, or Paul can, but that bed an’ those desks are heavy mothers, an’ I don’t want you tryin’ to move ’em on your own, hear me?”

“Y-yes, Monty.”

“It’s okay to do other stuff, but that’s a bit more of a task than I want you doin’ right now. – You wanna go mess with Paint or other things on your computer?”

Sniffing a bit, raising her head, she said, “That – that’s sounds good. I’ll go do that for a while.”

“Okay, hon’,” he said, kissing her forehead again. Rising, he helped her to her feet. Looking a bit dizzy, she headed for the room where her computer sat next to Paul’s on that enormous desk Monty’d gotten for them.

“Are you sure she ought to go on the drive, Monty?” I asked him as I came over to look into the sacks. “– Oh, good, you got the eggs – hey, apples!” I exclaimed happily as I pulled a Pippin from one of the sacks, then let it drop back in again.

“She’ll be fine. She looks great, ’cept for the weepy spells – haven’t you noticed?” Coming over to me, he gathered me up into his arms, and, returning to the couch, sat down with me on his lap.

“Come to think of it, I have. She looks . . . radiant. Except, as you say, for the crying jags and so on. I just . . . worry about her.”

“Look, if’n she really ain’t doin’ well when it’s time for Paul to leave for the drive, I’ll have her stay here. Rachel an’ Bill can keep watch on her, an’ mebbe Leroy could stay up here with her, so they’d have each other for company. But I think she’ll be fine. An’ she’ll be a lot happier on the drive than she would if’n we left her behind – I really don’t wanna come back to have Leah mad at me for makin’ her stay home when the rest of us went to Socorro!

“– Baby-Girl, I gotta get back to my office in a few minutes. Bill, Andy, an’ I got together with some other people this mornin’, an’ we’ve set a general manager’s meeting for June 26. We’ll be on the drive by then, o’ course, but they’ll let us know how the meetin’ went by radio.

“By the way, whilst I was down at Medical with Leah, I made an appointment for both of us for complete physicals an’ a consultation with the nutritional consultant on June 4 – that’s a Tuesday, the day after Ransdell an’ his crew are scheduled to return to their keep, an’ the day after Peter Dale visits. That okay with you?”

“Sure. As long as it isn’t too early or anything.”

“No, I made it for about 2 p.m.”

“Well . . . you sure we’ll be out of bed by then?” I asked him, trying not to smile.

“Woman,” he told me, giving me a quick, hard kiss, “you will be the death o’ me! Make an old, old man outta me afore I’m past the half-century mark!

“– Oh, shit, just remembered: gotta make another call,” he said, gently setting me down on the couch and getting to his feet. “Gotta call down to Stores, put in an order for those rollo gons an’ carriers, make sure they’re ready for Rich by June 2, when he’ll be goin’ back to Santa Cruz Island. Be right back . . .” he said, going into the kitchen.

A few minutes later he was back. “Okay, the order’s in. Good thing I put it in now – they’re backlogged on things, an’ even with the order in this early, they’re gonna have to hustle to get it all ready for Rich by the 2<sup>nd</sup> o’ next month, when he returns to Santa Cruz Island after his visit here.”

“Have you talked with Bill about getting those reactors for the Keep?”

“Yep. He’s all for it, long as we can keep the price down to what the Keep can afford. This is a rich Keep, you know, an’ he don’t think it’ll be too much trouble to work out a deal we can afford. Even if’n we can’t afford it by ourselves, Yeats prob’ly can – hell, I know he’ll help out if’n we need it. So Bill’ll back me all the way on ’em. Think about it: once they’re on line, we can start exportin’ power to other Keeps, an’ the things’d eventually pay for themselves. It’s just the start-up cost that concerns ’im, an’ he’s pretty sure that’ll be affordable – ’specially now we’re takin’ a good, hard look at what Accountin’s been up to.”

“Oh, don’t forget to call Pat Wall and let him know you want extra copies of those programs for Baron Ransdell.”

“Already did that, Baby-Girl,” he said, grinning. “Since he’s comin’ down here to beef up computer security for the whole Keep, makin’ a call to him from my office was a legitimate bidness expense – says right here in the Rules & Regulations, it does,” he said, miming holding up a booklet and, opening it up, pointing to a particular invisible page. “You know, the ones I wrote up m’self two years ago. – Anyways, I asked Pat to bring several copies each o’ Riyal, Halloran, Starshine, Lilly, Millennial Star, all kinds of astrology programs he has on hand. His niece has just about every astrology program ever made, an’ it’s no big deal for him to copy ’em all to CDs. He’ll have two sets for us, in case a CD gets scratched or somethin’, an’ two for Ransdell. He’s also gonna bring us digitized copies o’ the data from Hubble he’s been gettin’ from Admiral Resh, says there’s some stuff in there that makes the ones Hubble took o’ the Eagle an’ Lagoon nebulae back last century look like a retarded kid’s finger-paintin’s. – Wonder who that is?” he said as the phone started ringing. Sighing, he went back to the kitchen, picked up the phone.

“Yee-haaaaaww!” he cried as he returned to the front room, pumping his fist in victory.

“Who was it, sweetheart?”

“Bill! He talked with Engineerin’ about the reactors – they’re all for it, an’ they’re the ones the Council o’ Managers’ll go to for a cost-benefit analysis afore they spend any money on it.

“On top o’ that, the Governor called the Thorssons whilst I was collectin’ Leah from the docs. Seems Rich Ransdell called ’im on the Links last night after he talked with us, an’ relayed what I told Rich to tell ol’ man Yeats about the Thorssons perhaps bein’ able to suggest a workable strategy when it comes to dealin’ with UCSB that don’t involve nukes. The Thorssons say they’ll be glad to help. They’ll wait for a full report, then call back to Fort Sac to give Yeats their ideas, which Yeats’ll pass on from there to Admiral Resh, as well.

“– Baby-Girl, I’d best get out o’ here before anyone else calls. I gotta get down to Administration again – we’re gonna run off the stuff we need to audit Accountin’ an’ find out just how bad the situation with them is. I’ll be back in a few hours – don’t wait supper for me if’n it gets late, though, because it may turn out to be a hairier job than I thought, okay?”

“Sure, sweetheart. – Kiss?” I asked, tilting my head up.

Stooping down to brush my mouth with his, he said, tweaking one of my nipples for emphasis, his dark laughter rumbling from his chest, “That’s just to hold you ’til I get home tonight an’ we can down to some real lovin’, okay?”

“Monty –”

“Now, Baby-Girl, Poppa’s gotta get to work, no time for more right now,” he told me, chuckling as, going over to the rack where he’d hung up his guns, he took them down and belted them on. “Don’t worry, darlin’, I’ll still be in the mood when I get home.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” I told him, exasperated and wanting to weep with love for him at the same time, “I just worry that maybe Leroy’ll wander in and see us, you know.”

“No, he won’t. An’ right now he’s workin’ his tail off, callin’ those card-runs.”

“Card-runs?”

“Zener cards. Sets o’ cards with symbols on ’em. They got a star, a wiggly thing like the sigil o’ the sign of Aquarius, a cross, a couple of other things easy to visualize an’ remember. He’s workin’ on callin’ sets they’ll be layin’ out tonight, tomorrow, the next day, one o’ those double-blind projects they get from the Fleet, nobody knowin’ what the set they lay out each night is until the Fleet transmits it to us over the Links. Then he’ll do some remote viewin’.”

“You’ve gone over his work with him?”

“No, I just know what they do down there,” he said quickly, as if eager to put the question off. “Darlin’, I gotta go,” he said as he opened the door and slipped out into the hall.

Oh, Lord. How behind I was on things – and how much I’d forgotten! I suddenly recalled Zener cards, the cards which Dr. Rhine had used on his experiments in ESP at Duke University. How long ago it had been that I’d first read about them in one of Robert A. Heinlein’s juveniles! Was it *Time for the Stars?* *Tunnel in the Sky?* Maybe I’d better start eating a clove or two of fresh, raw garlic again every day – clearly my memory wasn’t what it had once been. The Szekeley swore by the stuff, said it was good for what ails man and beast, both physically, as a sovereign remedy for all forms of bacterial infections, a prophylactic against cancer as well as an aid in fighting it, a quick way of cleaning cholesterol and plaque out of the blood vessels, and a general all-around tonic and physic; and psychospiritually, doing pretty much the same for the soul and the Body of Light. I had tried ginkgo biloba for a month, once, to see whether it helped with memory, and while it had done some good, it wasn’t a patch on garlic. So maybe the Gypsies were right.

## **Chapter 2: Voices in the Wind**

What time was it? Past noon. Oh, Lord, I’d better put the groceries away and do something about lunch for all of us –

“Oh, hi, Paul,” I said, as Paul came in through the front door, closing it behind him. As he took off his guns and hung them up, I asked him, “How’d it go today?”

“I – where’s Leah?” he said in a low voice, looking around to see if she was present.

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“Working on her new computer,” I told him. “Leroy’s in his room, doing his work for Crypto.”

“Hannah, can I talk to you for a few minutes?” he asked me, his voice still low.

“S-sure. Shall we go into the kitchen?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’d be good. – Wait a minute, I’m going to get my guitar, first. Okay?”

“Sure. Okay with you if I fix lunch and put away these groceries while we talk?” I asked him, picking up the sacks of groceries Monty’d brought back and carrying them with us as we went into the kitchen.

“Sure, whatever. Be right back,” he told me as he headed for his room. A minute or so later he returned. “Yeah, Leah’s working on an art project, I think,” he told me as he took a seat at the breakfast-nook table, setting his guitar down on the floor at one end of the bench, leaning up against it. “I asked her if she minded if I had a private talk with you for a while, and she said it was fine, she had to work on whatever it is and wouldn’t be much company for me right now, anyway.” He sounded odd, not exactly dispirited, but as if some of his tremendous energy had drained out of him, and his mind were far away.

“So, what’s up?” I asked him as I put away the groceries and then began making some bacon-and-egg sandwiches.

“Well . . . I had kind of an interesting session with Yuri today. He got me into a deeper trance than usual, and got hold of some stuff in there that we hadn’t gotten to before.”

“Oh?” I said noncommittally as I put several rashers of beef bacon into the frying pan and turned it on. I could have microwaved them – but somehow it never tastes quite the same as pan-cooked.

“And while he had me in that trance, I remembered stuff about the – about what happened up there on the cliffs the other day, before the guys found me. It was . . . really strange.”

Pausing in my work, I turned to look at him. “You look as if it were a lot more than just strange, Paul.”

“Yeah, I guess that fits, too,” he said, staring far off into space as if at some fearful and wonderful vision.

“You sure you want to tell me about this whatever-it-was?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said, sighing. “It might make a little more sense of . . . things.”

“Okay, I don’t mind if you want to tell me. It just sounds like it’s a little heavy, reliving it.”

“Oh, it’s heavy, all right – but . . . do you remember the time you told me the meaning of the word mitzvah?”

“Yes, I do,” I said, “‘a divine commandment’ or ‘meritorious deed.’”

“That’s right, only you said something else, too. You said ‘a burden of diamonds.’ A heavy burden so valuable to he who carries it that he is glad to be burdened with it, something like that. Well, I think I have a mitzvah, here, to tell you what happened to me up there on those cliffs last week.

“. . . Only, as you said about mitzvahs – mitzvahim? -- anyway, it’s heavy. Not for me, love, I lived through it, but I know Monty didn’t tell you everything I told him the night after it happened, because it was so strange and so . . . hard to listen to, and even he hasn’t heard this stuff, yet.”

“I’ve lived eight decades now, Paul, and there’s not a whole helluva a lot I haven’t heard,” I said, scooping out the bacon, which was done, and putting it onto a rack to let the drippings fall onto the plastic shunt that carried them into grease-can for use later. “As far as weird goes, there’s probably a lot I’ve missed,” I said, cracking six eggs and putting them into the pan to fry up – Leroy’d probably want a sandwich, too. “But I lived through the last three decades and more of the second half of the last century, and so far I’ve been through nearly five decades of this one, and we had it all, as far as scary and painful things go, from Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, Chernobyl, and Love Canal to the War and everything that came after it. So fire away.”

“Well, okay . . .

“When I left here last Tuesday, after being such an asshole to you and Leah, as I guess Monty and Andy and Bill told you, I put on a djellaba and got some survival gear and left via the courtyard, headed up the canyon to the desert beyond.

“I was about 120 yards or so from the canyon’s mouth when I heard a voice call my name. ‘Paul,’ it said, ‘Paul, the answer you’re looking for is up there in the hills above the west side of this canyon.’ The weirdest thing about that was that right at that moment, the wind was blowing hard, and because of all the sand and dust it kicked into the air I could barely see my hand in front of my face – and yet right then, as the voice spoke, I saw this, this path going up the western side of the canyon, right there in front of me, about thirty feet away. It looked like an easy climb. It seemed to have a, a golden glow about it, as if there were a lot of mica or something in the dirt there and the Sun were hitting it directly, spotlighting it – only with all

that dust in the air, that shouldn't have happened, the dust should have blocked the light, instead. But it didn't.

"I'm not sure why, but I . . . found myself moving toward that path, then starting to climb up it. It took me what seemed to be about an hour to reach the top of the cliff, even though it wasn't a difficult climb – normally such a climb would've taken, oh, fifteen-twenty minutes, at the most. It seemed as if I were climbing a much higher cliff than was actually the case, but without any sense of strain or extra effort. As if the, the geometry of the place had gone all funny, somehow.

"When I got to the top, the visibility was somewhat better than it had been down below, and I could see several hundred feet in all directions. I got spooked when I realized that it didn't look anything like it had any of the times I'd gone up there before over the years. Instead of the brush and scrub and chaparral that are actually up there, stretching away ahead of me and on both sides there was a, a dark wood, a vast, dark forest, full of huge, weird-looking trees and these even weirder-looking plants, and enormous, misshapen fungi like something out of a fairy-tale, in every color imaginable and some not, giving off bizarre scents and strange stenches.

"There were animals living there, too. At first, I thought they were just mutant insects and chipmunks and like that, the sort of creatures that really do live up there. But when I took a better look at them, I found none of them were anything like I'd ever seen before. Would you believe ten-legged spiders with fangs at both ends, and things like ground squirrels, but almost a yard long and standing a foot high at the shoulder, with violet fur, bright scarlet eyes, long, emerald-green spines on their backs, and packing a mouthful of teeth a wolf would've envied?

"– Here, bring those on over here and sit down next to me, love," he said, gently patting the table-top to his right for emphasis, as I finished making the sandwiches, capped the mayonnaise jar, and put it back in the refrigerator.

"Sure. Er, do you want some juice?"

"That sounds good. Here, you sit down, I'll go get it," he told me, rising to his feet as I put the plate full of sandwiches on the table before him. Coming over to me, he gently steered me over to the bench and got me to sit down next to the place he'd taken. Then, going to the refrigerator, he got out a half-empty pitcher of juice and, along with two glasses he fetched down from the cupboard, he brought it back to the table and set it down there.

Taking his seat again, he said, "Anyway, as I looked around I could see other things that didn't look like anything normal – yellow-and-green-striped bunch grass, huge ginkgoes, enormous ferns, some really oddball flowering plants that looked like mutant magnolias and daisies, horsetail ferns that were as tall and thick-boled as good-sized trees, things like that. I could see more animals, too, including two-foot long dragonflies, these gigantic black beetles with bright sky-blue stripes down their wing-cases, some small animals that looked like crosses between rats and weasels that scuttled for cover as I went by, a little lizardy-looking thing that ran by on two legs and was covered with feathers, and giant amphibians big as crocodiles lurking in the shadows next to big ponds I'd never seen up there before. Then it got seriously weird.

"Because, about then I saw someone standing inside the wood, beckoning to me to come forward. Whoever it was called out to me: 'I am he who was sent to meet thee here, that thou mayest be tested.' – Monty told you that much, didn't he?" Paul asked me, putting his arm around me.

"Yes, he did. He even told me what you reported that whatever-it-was said to you – with that trick memory of his, he can remember even long, long passages of anything he's read just once."

"Well, after some of the work Yuri's been doing with me these past few days, I may be getting such a memory myself. That's just what that thing up there said to me, word for word – I can hear it in my mind just as clearly as if I were still up there on the cliffs, with that . . . being standing in front of me, saying that to me.

"Now, mind, he didn't say it in English. The way it sounded was pure gibberish, in barks and grunts and whistles like a cross between that nest of those big monitor lizards they had trouble with at San Bee about fifteen years ago, the ones they thought might have been descendants of escapees from the Komodo dragon lizard pavilion at the old Griffith Park Zoo, and some big-mouthed, attitudinous mockingbird might sound like. But the sense of those words rang clear as bell in my mind as he spoke them. They came out in that Old English style, just like the King James Bible or something. Why they translated that way, I'm not sure – I think it had something to do with the, the solemnity of the occasion and what it ultimately meant.

"Anyway, I called out to him, 'Who are you? Where the hell have you come from?'"

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“I still couldn’t see whoever it was very clearly. It was just a dark, hooded figure wearing what looked like voluminous black robes, sort of like a monk. It answered, ‘I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed –’ he really said ‘seed,’ Batrix, to mean my descendants, like in olden times – ‘and make thy seed as the sands of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude. But I must take thy measure, and test thy temper, before this shall be fulfilled.’ Quote, unquote.

“I kept walking toward it. Finally I was close enough to see details in spite of the gloom of the forest all around us – and what I saw almost had me turning around and running back for the edge of the cliff and the canyon below at warp speed!

“Within the thing’s hood, where there should have been a human face, or any kind of real face, there were just two glowing, blood-red eyes swimming in blackness as deep as outer space. It had hooks for hands, and clawed, scaly feet like a monitor lizard’s showing below the hem of its robe. It stood about seven feet tall, maybe taller, and was as big as a Kodiak bear (I’ve read about those; if they’re still around, they can get as big as 13 feet from toes to the tip of the snout, and as proportionately big in the body to match).

“Then I got another look at those black robes I thought it was wearing. They weren’t robes, Hannah. They weren’t robes at all. They were wings. Enormous black wings, with feathers like a raven’s, only much longer.

“It . . . advanced on me, like a Sumo wrestler in some of those ‘cubes you and Monty have, moving in on his opponent. Next thing I knew, it lunged at me, and I was into the fight of my life!

“We began to wrestle. It seemed to go on forever, and I was starting to tire, and that’s when he hooked a leg behind mine and brought me down, flat on my face. The next thing I knew, he was on top of me, and skinning my trousers off me, and then he – then he raped me,” he said, wincing a little at remembered pain.

“What?”

“Oh, yes, Hannah. That’s just what he did – and it was definitely a ‘he,’ no doubt about that! He raped me. Took me right in the ass. That’s the thing that Yuri and I weren’t able to reach until today. The . . . the being raped me, oh, yes, he did.

“But that didn’t keep me from fighting back. I mean, the big bastard must’ve weighed, oh, a quarter of a ton or maybe more, but the Thorssons taught me well: I kept struggling and trying for one hold after another, and finally I somehow got both arms up behind his head and pulled his head forward until his . . . head was flat against the back of my head, and I tucked and rolled and clawed and suddenly he was outta me and I was out from under him and then . . . then I raped him.

“– That strikes you as weird, love? It freaked me out more than just about anything else that’s ever happened to me ever has. It was as if my body was acting of its own accord, right out of Void, where all the instincts are, where everything we might ever need to know always is. I was just . . . sitting there behind the front of my skull, watching while my body did everything, not getting in its way because I knew it was doing what needed to be done, but feeling very strange about not having any say in it.

“Anyway, I raped him. I pushed his wings aside and then got a hold on them so that if he tried to move it’d hurt like hell, one of those ‘take-alongs’ that are some of the first things Andy and Liz teach us. And then . . .

“And then the strangest thing happened. First, I began to feel so good – I’d never had sex like that before! It was . . . it was just like Monty was telling me about ‘Kundalini rising,’ only about a million times more powerful. Like I was a volcano in eruption, and the lava coming out of me was pure ecstasy. I don’t know how to describe it – it wasn’t Good Sex like it is with Monty or you or Leah, it was more like a . . . a religious experience, I guess. Yes, that’s just what it was, like I was fucking God, and God was fucking me back, and all there was, was that, a universe of that. Ecstasy and agony and horror and joy all mingled together. It shattered my heart and mind and rebuilt them, walked me through Hell and out the other side. It – it was a little like it is for me with Monty.

“Somewhere in there, Hannah, my mind – I’m not sure how to describe this. It . . . got all tangled up in his mind. Like we were two minds in the same skull, or rather both our skulls, because he had everything in my mind and I had everything in his. It was the most terrifying fucking thing (no pun intended) I have ever been through in my life – and maybe the most wonderful.

“The first thing that happened then was that I realized that the . . . man, let’s call him that, he wasn’t human but that doesn’t mean anything to the soul – or the heart – the man looked as ugly and frightening as he did because, though obviously powerful and vital, he was very, very old, battle-scarred like a veteran

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of every war the history books ever tried to forget, and heavy-muscled due to training in the same sort of combat arts the Thorssons teach here. He was also scarred all over and otherwise dinged up from some unimaginable catastrophe – no, I take that back, it’s a catastrophe that’s been imagined by scientists and everyone else for the last 60 or 70 years, it’s just one we’ve never lived through, and let us pray to God we never have to!

“That guy was a born warrior, and in his time he’d been a businessman working in a company his family owned, a veteran mercenary, a regular soldier – actually, a Marine in his country’s service – a cop, a bodyguard, even something like our private investigators, and he looked it, too. And he was built like that, big and broad and covered with muscle and scars, and a lot bigger than a man because members of his . . . species were, on the average, a lot bigger than us. And maybe he had a mom who made him eat everything on his plate when he was a kid,” he said, smiling a little. Drawing me close, he continued:

“He had his own religion, too. He was very devout. As for what he believed, it seemed to be a lot like Shinto, maybe, or Tibetan Buddhism, but with some other things thrown in, including a lot of Zen, and even a great deal of Roman Catholicism and Hinduism. He didn’t have any problem with my world-view, anyway, and what he believed wasn’t so far removed from what I did. Do.

“Like I said, he was really ugly, thanks to everything he’d been through, but I caught glimpses through his mind of the younger members of his species, along with some of their cities and the rest of their world. They were a rather attractive people, and they had wonderful cities – they were on the verge of going to the stars when . . . it happened. Sure, they all had those sharp teeth and deadly talons on their hands and feet, but that was part of their regular makeup, and on them it looked . . . okay. They looked a little like, oh, velociraptors, or maybe very small Tyrannosauri with much longer arms than normal and real hands, except that they stood completely upright on two legs, whereas the Tyrannosauri sort of crouched or held their bodies level with the ground, and they had three fingers and a thumb on each hand, whereas a T. rex had only two fingers and no thumb on each of its hands.

“Hannah, they were Mesozoic people. People. Men and women and children, just in different sorts of bodies than the kind we have.”

“Dinosaurs?”

“Well, why not? A lot of dinosaurs were probably warm-blooded, the way we are, especially the dromaeosaurs and other theropods, and some had very big brains, with that extra-efficient neurological information processing like birds do today. They were very successful animals. They hung around for maybe 150 million years, and they might have been going strong today if it hadn’t been for . . . it.”

“‘It’?”

“The K-T event. The thing that ended the Cretaceous, and wiped out the last of the dinosaurs, along with one hell of a lot of other species that were alive then. And I . . . experienced that, too, through his mind. He . . . lived through it. If you want to call it that. He was away on some sort of business trip on an island about halfway around the world from what would be the Yucatán Peninsula today, just off the east coast of Africa, when it happened, and he was on the fringes of it. He actually survived it.”

“Oh, God.”

“You bet, love. It was real bad. There was more than one strike – they could have been asteroids, though were more likely pieces of a busted-up comet, and at least ten or twelve chunks of whatever it was hit the planet, and possibly many more. One, the biggest, was at Chicxulub, in the Yucatán. Another was near the place that’s know now as Manson, Iowa. Those may have been hit first, but I think there were some smaller preliminary strikes in the Atlantic. Two more strikes, a little smaller than the one that hit the Yucatán, came down on Siberia a little after those two big ones hit North America. We’ve known about all four of those biggest ones since the 1980s or 1990s; but there was also one that hit the ocean just off the coast of Siberia – Admiral Resh’s people mapped that one back about five years ago on an undersea expedition, and it may have hit about the same time the two in Siberia did, or a little before. And there were almost certainly several more, ocean strikes impacting the Pacific Ocean, that occurred between the North American impacts and the bolides that hit Siberia, and maybe even several small ones in the Tethys Seaway, which separated Eurasia from Africa, and North America from South America. If any did hit the Tethys, the reason we haven’t found those is because seafloor is so quickly subducted and destroyed, eliminating any sign of impacts there within a few million years or so, and the Tethys Seaway ceased to exist long, long ago, when Africa crashed into Eurasia on its northward passage from Gondwana, the great southern continent that broke up tens of millions of years ago.



“From what I saw through my . . . friend’s mind while we were . . . making love, because that’s what it turned into, the two of us making love, instead of mutual rape – from what I saw through his mind, it was like something straight out of Hieronymus Bosch, or Dante: a series of earthquakes that knocked him off his feet, followed later by waves of killing heat, hot enough to roast meat, which came ripping out from each strike, followed by falls of white-hot debris, like something out of the Seventh Circle of Hell, the Round of the Violent against God, Nature, and Art. My friend was close enough to Siberia at the time of the strikes there that by the time the heat from those impacts and the blazing fallout that followed hit the island he was on, it was still over 300 degrees Fahrenheit where he was, hot as a sauna, hot enough to boil water.

“I can imagine what it was like,” Paul said, shuddering . . .

### **Chapter 3: Dawn After the End of the World**

*Dawn – his full name was Sir Dawnlight-on-the-Inland-Sea Son-of-Far-Roving-Adventurer First-Born-of-the-River-Clans, or Dawn, for short – had come to Hunter’s Paradise on a business trip.<sup>1</sup> He hadn’t minded – it was the sort of place that tourists loved to visit, too. He’d been there for ten days, and had more or less wrapped up his business, and soon he’d be leaving again for home, flying back on a big transcontinental jet. So this morning he had just wanted to savor the beauty of the island, the tropical warmth baking into his bones before he had to leave, and accordingly had put on his tackiest, loudest tropical shirt, (the one his third co-husband simply loathed, so much fun to wear to barbecues and outdoor buffets held by their neighbors and friends during the Summer), a pair of khaki shorts, a ridiculous little raffia hat to shade his eyes from the sun and keep his head cool, and palm-weave sandals, and had taken a stroll from his hotel down along the great boulevard that ran the length of the city, less than a hundred yards from the shoreline. He took his time there, doing a lot of people-watching, enjoying the beauty of the day and the wealth of tropical life that swarmed the island. The streets were filled with people all doing the same as he, enjoying one another and the warmth of the day and the beauty of the island and its surroundings. There was a street-fair in progress down the way, and up the other way was a flea-market and bazaar that also boasted world-famous restaurants – he’d try to take both in before the day was through.*

*Hunter’s Paradise, an island situated between the east coast of Eastern Gond<sup>2</sup> and the west coast of Malagasy<sup>3</sup> had been given its name because, long ago, when first discovered by Dawn’s people, it had held species of great carnivores unknown anywhere else in the world, or which had been thought to have been long extinct. Eastern Gond was just far enough away that it was below the horizon, hidden from view by the Earth’s curvature; but the big island to the east of Hunter’s Paradise was easily visible as a line of low mountains covered with tropical verdure. There were smaller islands to the north, too, an archipelago comprising a long arc of closely spaced islands of various sizes, some larger than Hunter’s Paradise, some smaller. Among the many islands off the east coast of Eastern Gond there were all sorts of reefs, a magnet for sports fishermen as well as marine biologists because of the fantastic variety of living creatures that dwelled in and around them, from sponges, jellyfish, corals, barnacles, and kelp all the way up to sharks, ammonites, mososaurs, plesiosaurs, revenant populations of mesosaurs and ichthyosaurs, and the like – not to mention the wealth of plankton that supported so much of that life. Because of the protection offered by Eastern Gond on one side, islands on the other side, and the barrier reefs between, Hunter’s Paradise had offered great strategic value early in the annals of civilization, and had long since served as a military base for one nation or another, depending upon the fortunes of history and war. Right now, it belonged to North Sandstone,<sup>4</sup> Dawn’s nation, and her allies, though doubtless, given what Dawn knew of history, someday it might well belong to her worst enemies. Well, that was for the Lady of Battles, Her consort, the Destroyer, and Her favorite companion, the little mammal His followers familiarly referred to as “Yip,” to determine, not any mortal man or woman.*

*There were also sea-caves along the edges of the big island, with numerous entrances into the ocean just below the waterline. These were another reason why Hunter’s Paradise was a world-famous tourist resort and scientific treasure, in addition to its value as a military base. There were life-forms in those caves unlike anything anywhere else on Earth – miniature, blind mososaurs; strange velvet-worms that hearkened back to their ancestors of the early Cambrian, when multicellular life first came into its own; tiny sea-scorpions, descendants of the giant eurypterids that had prowled the world’s seas back in the*

*Silurian Period, over 350 million years ago; blind, equally tiny neo-placoderms, the last revenant of the Devonian populations of the fearsome, heavily armored marine carnivores that had lived more than 300 years before; small amphibians that may have been direct descendants of the ichthyostegans that were, perhaps, the first amphibians to have appeared on Earth, subsisting in the sea-caves of Hunter's Paradise on the various types of invertebrate life that haunted the caves; strange, huge, blind sea-spiders that hunted their prey by means of the vibrations that the latter gave off while walking or swimming; even lichens that lived entirely off nutrients produced by the fungal half of the team, because the phosphorescence that was given off by various types of sessile organisms on cave walls and ceiling, the only natural light in the caves, was far too impoverished to keep a photosynthesizer like a free alga alive.*

*Dawn chuckled to himself over his second wife's nervous protestations concerning his trip in the last few days before he left home for his trip to Hunter's Paradise. Leaves-Falling-in-Graceful-Sorrow-as-the-Year-Approaches-its-End – "Autumn," for short – was a professional astrologer, and had been looking over the transits that would be in progress during his trip, as well his progressed chart. Red-Eye,<sup>5</sup> the Planet of the Lady of Battles, she told him, would be in opposition the whole time he was away, and, at the same time, it would be making unfortunate aspects to Big Stripes,<sup>6</sup> the first real planet beyond Red-Eye's orbit around the Sun (ignoring the asteroid belt between the two), as well as some hard aspects to the Golden One,<sup>7</sup> the beautiful, slightly smaller gas-giant just beyond Big Stripes. And there were also Sky-Maiden<sup>8</sup> and Blue-Water,<sup>9</sup> beyond the Golden One, to consider, of course – neither were in signs of their strength, and both would be in bad aspect to the Sun, and – 'And, and, and,' he'd said, laughing, cutting off her anxious catalog of potential planetary disaster areas before she could get too upset. 'Beloved Autumn, my very darling one,' he'd told her, taking her in his arms and kissing her tenderly, 'believe me, nothing bad will happen to me, and I'll be home, safe and sound, before you know it' – and then he'd felt a sudden chill go up his spine, as if he'd had a sudden premonition of something terrible to come. Ignoring it, he'd picked her up and taken her to bed to soothe her with love-making, and had finally restored her to her normal smiling self.*

*Dawn looked up again at the sky, seeing the great blue-edged cumuli that floated so serenely along the edge of the world, birds flying in V-formation through the sky, an enormous pterosaur gliding smoothly overhead at a much lower altitude, the brilliant noonday Sun. The Moon would be rising soon.*

*. . . Odd, it had been perfectly clear this morning, and neither the weather channel on the radio nor the Weatherman Internet site had said anything about bad weather coming. What was that dark front coming down from the north? Wonder if it had anything to do with those strange aurorae that had been seen all over the world over the past week or so? Could it –*

*– Whut.*

*– Whoo-whut.*

*What the –? Bullets? Was some nutcase –*

*Something was falling from the air, making little whistling murmurs as it descended.*

*– Whu-whut.*

*– Whu-whu-whu-WHUT!*

*That hurt, dammit! That last one had landed on his shoulder, hard enough to bruise. – And it was hot! Jerking his hand away from it, he stared at it as it fell to the ground, smoking.*

*Now the things, whatever they were, were starting to fall everywhere without letup, accompanied not just by those soft, murmurous, whistling whispers like the sound of a well-made boomerang in flight, but far louder sounds, as well, building up to shrieking, roaring pandemonium.*

*– Oh, Gods, that hurt like a bastard! Yelping as he knocked flaming debris from his shoulders and back, turning and jumping about in an attempt to avoid being hit by more of the falling stuff, he stared unbelievably at the sky, then all around him.*

*The sky was on fire!*

*It looked as if the whole world had caught fire. Red-hot debris was falling everywhere. All around him, people were screaming, jumping, flailing and batting at the firebrands raining down on them, trying vainly to avoid them, seeking shelter anywhere they could find it. Flames were beginning to rise from the homes and business buildings that lined the street and filled the low hills stretching away from the shore. Someone's little pet deltatheridium ran shrieking down the street, its coat blazing from head to tail. Another pet, this one a tiny coelurosaur that must once have been very handsome, a delicate pattern of*

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*blue-and-white diamonds covering its otherwise jet-black skin on its sides and back, stumbled in its headlong, panicked flight down the street and fell over on its side, its legs and feet jerking spasmodically, victim of a chunk of flaming, charred-looking debris weighing a good 60 pounds or so that had fallen squarely on its head, instantly crushing the life out of it. A few hundred feet up the street from Dawn, a woman was frantically dancing about in the street, screaming in terror and agony, her garments blazing, her face a ruined, nightmare mask of charred flesh, the left side of her face caved in by something huge and fiery-hot. At a nearby curb, a mother flung herself over her two children, trying to shield them from the fiery debris raining down everywhere – in vain, for within seconds another large chunk of incandescent material landed on all three of them, crushing the life out of them, then burning their flattened corpses to ashes in instants. A little farther down the street a vehicle exploded – something the size of a small van, white-hot and shedding droplets of incandescent metal, had landed on it.*

*Shelter! He had to find shelter! The initial muted susurrus of the falling debris had risen to a terrifying, world-shattering scream, and the sky seemed to have been replaced by an endless howling fall of the hellish stuff that spared nothing and no one, as far as the eye could see. The whole world was on fire! His own clothing was blazing in numerous places, now, and he could smell the frying-bacon aroma of his own flesh beginning to sizzle beneath it.*

*Looking around frantically, vainly trying to beat out the smoldering places on his clothing as more and more burning debris fell on him, the little flames licking up from places on his trousers and shirt and hat where the stuff had hit and clung, all he could see that might afford shelter was the ocean, less than a hundred yards away . . .*

“Dawn was . . . lucky. He happened to be very near the shore of the island at the time, and he just jumped into the water, clothes and all, and tried to stay under as long as he could. The water never did get too hot – the air would have to have been a lot hotter than it actually was before the ocean would’ve warmed up much – but every time he came up for a breath, the scalding-hot air and the sulfuric acid fumes generated by the interaction of the incoming debris with the salty ocean water almost killed him when he tried to breathe the polluted air just above the surface of the water. But on his third dive down he saw a hole in the sloping seafloor, and on a hunch he swam into it, hoping against hope it was one of the caves that extended far back beneath the island – and that it had an air-pocket in it above the waterline.

“Dawn lucked out – it was indeed such a sea-cave, and to his vast relief he found that its roof actually went way up into the body of the island itself, above the waterline. There was even a long, canted natural ledge that went around the cave from below the waterline to way above it, and, using that ledge, he made it up to a place where he could sit down, a foot or so above the waterline, and rest. The air in the cave above the waterline was fresh, cool, and slightly moist – it never did get very warm or dry, implying that it had no direct connection with the surface, else he and every other living thing in that cave would have been baked alive as the roasting-hot air around the island invaded the cave. Where it came from was a mystery Dawn was never able to solve, but that mystery kept him and everything else in the cave alive, and right then, that was all he cared about.

“Dawn stayed down there in that cave for a long time, at least a week – he noted the phase of the Moon when he got out, and noted that it had passed from one phase to the next while he was down there, so it was somewhere between a week and 10 days when he finally emerged from the cave again. (His people measured time much as we do, with months of 31 days long, and 7-day weeks, each day of which had a distinct astrological ruler the same way ours do, each week corresponding to the period between one lunation and the next, First Quarter to Full Moon, Full Moon to Third Quarter, and so on.) There was fresh water available to him – the back of the cave opened on caverns running under the island that contained streams and small lakes fed by runoff, reservoirs of water down there under the earth that never emptied because there was nowhere for the water in them to go, the air-temperature wasn’t that great, and evaporation from them was slow. There were also cave-fish in the sea-water, large beetles, good-sized frogs, edible algae and fungi, and other things he could eat in and around the caverns’ freshwater bodies. As for light to see by, there was plenty of it from phosphorescence, so he could see his surroundings without difficulty, once his eyes became adapted to the dimmer light there. It wasn’t hot down there, nor very cold, for that matter – the undersea inlet saw to that, as well as the fact that it was a true cave, whose internal temperature remained virtually constant at all times. So he was able to take off his tunic, underwear, and trousers and rinse them out in seawater, then dry them off on stalagmites, without getting too cold (though

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he kept on the raffia-weave-and-plastic-soled sandals he'd been wearing when fire began to rain down from the heavens, to protect the soles of his feet, which were as tender as ours generally are, from the sharp rocks lining the floor of the cave).

“And since part of Dawn’s training, way back when he was a young . . . man, going into his people’s defense forces as a, I guess you’d say a Ranger, like Special Forces were back before the Two-Day War, except that this was a special division of their Marines – since part of his military training was in learning how to eat off the land, eating food raw if you couldn’t cook it, he didn’t need to cook his food. It never got very cold down there in the caverns beneath Hunter’s Paradise, either, so he didn’t need a fire to keep warm. So he stayed down there for a few days, until he figured whatever it was had died down and he could come out.

“Dawn wasn’t in very good shape when he emerged from that cave, however. The day of the impacts, red-hot debris had come flying through the air, likely carried all the way from the mainland, and he was hit by some fairly hefty chunks of it. One of his arms had been fractured by a blow from a piece of the stuff, and, probably during his marathon race down to the water and his dive down to the mouth of the cave, he had sprained his ankle so badly it might as well have been broken, as well. He was bruised everywhere, and he thought his spleen might’ve been ruptured – a relatively small tear, or he wouldn’t have lived through it. He also had burns all over his body – when it happened, there was so much blazing, incandescent crud coming down all over there was no way he could have avoided all of it. Most of the burns weren’t too bad, but he’d sustained a third-degree burn over most of the arm that got broken – fortunately it was his right arm, and, like most of his people, he was left-handed, or else he wouldn’t have been able to get down to that cave and survive there the way he did. One of his eyes was hurt – something hit it during those first moments after the world blew up and incandescent junk began raining down on Hunter’s Paradise, and he had become partially blind in that eye.

“Dawn wasn’t a young man any more, either. If he’d been human, I’d put him at about fifty years old, though his people lived longer on average than we do, so he could well have been a good deal older. He was in damned good shape for someone that age, at least before the impacts, but nothing like a young man at the top of his form. And he had a family back on the . . . mainland, on the Gulf Coast of North America, or what was going to become North America some day. Wives, co-husbands, grown children, their children, a brother and two sisters of his own and their children, all part of a great extended family that lived together in a huge villa there on the coast of southern North America, in a community of . . . people like themselves. They had domestic animals, work-animals and pets and some for food, like we keep chickens and cattle, and a number of tenants. Lots of his good friends there, most of his kin – and he had a dreadful premonition that by now, all of them were gone. After what had just happened, it would have been more than a miracle if any of them had survived.

“Dawn was a well-educated man, you see – his people had books, too, almost like ours, and while their writing was of course different from any written human language, it did the same service for them that our written language does for us, and Dawn had become addicted to a good read early on in life, reading adventure stories under the covers at night with a flashlight, just like so many kids do now,” he said, smiling a little as he looked off into the distance, thinking.

“You sound as if you like him.”

“Yes, very much. I guess that sounds funny, considering how our . . . relationship, such as it was, started off, doesn’t it? But you might say that things up there on top of the cliffs weren’t exactly the way they seemed at first glance. That rape wasn’t a rape, and he wasn’t the monster I saw him as at first, the monster I carried a memory of until today, when Yuri was finally able to unlock the . . . core of what really went on up there. At first, I experienced what was happening as an attack, then as a rape, because of the mind-set I had. But by the time I . . . raped Dawn back, that mind-set was starting to change, and when his mind and mine . . . our minds merged the way they did, it all turned into something very different than what it had been when our battle began.”

“Did you remember the . . . the rape before today?”

“Yes, love, I did,” he said, cuddling me close, giving the top of my head a light, brief kiss. “And all the fear, and the anger, and . . . well, other things. I talked those over with Monty that first night after I got back, talked it all out of my system, somehow, because the next day, they were all fading away. Maybe it was this other stuff starting to emerge, the new mind-set or whatever you want to call it I got into up there during that mind-merge, coming up, changing things, changing the shape of my emotions and way of seeing

things. But these memories, about that . . . man, only came up into consciousness this morning when I was with Yuri, and Monty doesn't know anything about them, yet."

"You said he had wings. But he also had arms and legs, too? That doesn't sound like any dinosaurs I know of – I know birds are probably dinosaurs themselves, descended from very early dinosaurs, but wings and legs and arms would have given that fellow six limbs, which isn't a vertebrate trait."

"I think the wings were symbolic, Hannah. They had to've been. Dawn was . . . you could call him a ghost, or even, in a sense, an angel. My angel, because, thanks to him, I ended up not going out into the desert, didn't run away and leave everything behind that made life worth living. And as for why those wings were black – well, at first, before these other memories finally came back up, I thought it meant he was evil. But now I think it just fit the symbolism of the dojo – we all train in black gis, you know. You do yourself. It's because we're all ninjas – that's where the Kagemushakan came from, those old, old combat skills and techniques developed by real warriors on real battlefields and crossbred with the outlook and guerilla-warfare skills of the Ninja. And that's what that old man I . . . fought out there was, a Mesozoic ninja. He'd have fit right in with the rest of the dojo crowd – Andy'd have loved him! (In fact, Andy was down there today when I had that session with Yuri, and he and I and Yuri talked it over afterward, and it was Andy who pointed out that thing about blackness. Andy was fascinated all to hell and gone by the story – we're gonna do another session one of these days where Yuri's going to see if I've got any of the old man's techniques and training history and so on down there in my unconscious memory.) Also, black symbolizes Void, the great unknown out of which all things come, and to which they return at the end of all things – God, by another word and symbol. After all, God is infinite, and we poor mortals can know only very little of what God really is, the rest being boundless black seas of infinity as far as we're concerned. You could say that in a way, black symbolizes holiness – sure, we often equate it with evil, but night is dark, and is as necessary to life as the day, and without blackness, light would have no meaning. So it can symbolizes good as well as evil."

"Did he have a name?"

"Yes. I couldn't pronounce it or his title to save my soul, but it comes out to something like '*sensei* Sir Dawnlight-on-the-Inland-Sea First-Born-of-the-River-Clans.' 'Dawnlight-on-the-Inland Sea' was his first name, while First-Born-of-the-River-Clans was his family name. I think he had a patronymic, too, the way Russians do, something like 'Son-of-Far-Roving-Adventurer.' Among friends, he'd be called 'Dawn,' a shortened version of his given name, and the name with which he identified himself.

"He had a nickname, too – a close approximation of it is 'Sneaky Rat' – a pet name, like the kind Big Bill gives his ferrets. Dawn and his people made pets of some of the mammals with which they shared their world, including proto-primates that did look a lot like rats but were often as smart as ferrets, with similar habits. His own sensei gave him the nickname 'Sneaky Rat' when he was still an adolescent, because he was so good at the same sort of guerilla tricks that those little mammals used all the time. It was a compliment, a big one, at least among others who were trained the way he was."

"What happened to him? Was he able to leave the island he was on?"

"Oh, sorry, love, I guess I got distracted. Yes, he did. For one thing, the entire time he was holed up in that cave, one heavy, rolling earth-shock after another rumbled through it, sending bits of rock sifting down from above, roiling the water at the bottom of the cave until it looked as if it had been set on the stove to boil. Most of those shocks were fairly mild, but there were a few heavy enough to make him fear that the roof of the cave he was in might collapse. After a little over a week of enduring those aftershocks, climaxed by an especially strong temblor that brought a number of stalactites spearing down from the ceiling of the cave, the needle-fine tip of one of them missing him by mere inches, he finally left the cave and returned to the world above.

"Coming back out of the cave the same way he'd gone in, swimming back through the long underwater tunnel that gave on the sea, Dawn came up to the surface of the water to find himself in the midst of a hard, freezing storm of icy rain mixed with sleet, the air reeking of scorched metal and sulfuric acid and charred wood, concrete, and flesh. Climbing back onto the land, eventually he found a, well, we'd call it a motorized launch that was moored there in one of the island's harbors. Dawn had always liked boats, and even owned a motorized yacht of his own, which he and his family used to take little trips up and down the coast near where they all lived. Hunter's Paradise, the island he was on, was a little like Hawaii or Oahu in the Hawaiian archipelago was until the War, a place with several harbors, and military industries and installations all over the place, along with plenty of civilian businesses and housing. The big harbor where

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he found the launch was part of a naval base. Dawn was a, oh, I guess you could call him a contractor with his country's military, something to do with manufacturing of tools and equipment used by their navy and army, and the contractors who made the boats, submarines, ships, tanks, and guns deployed by both services. He had come to the island to take part in a conference having to do with his country's navy's need for various kinds of tools that was held a couple of days before the, the Event. So he knew his way around the island and what sort of resources might still be there, assuming they'd been protected from the worst of the Event.

"Like I said, Dawn finally left the cavern the same way he'd entered it, diving down into the sea inlet and coming out through the cave-entrance into the ocean, then swimming up to the surface of the water and onto the shore. From there, coughing hard because of the smog and crud still filling the air from the Event and the fires it had started all over the world, he walked up the beach to the harbor, which wasn't too far away, and started checking it out.

"Dawn found the launch in a lagoon at the back of the harbor, inside a big concrete docking facility – they'd put it in there to be painted or some other type of maintenance, and when the Event happened, it was protected by four stout concrete walls and a thick concrete roof from the rain of red-hot debris and other fallout from the Event, while the seawater all around it as well as inside the facility kept it cool enough that there was little or no substantial damage from the heat. The launch had a big hydrogen-cell battery that was fully charged and ready to go – oh, yes, they'd gotten that far along with their technology. The launch was sitting in seawater, because the foundation of the building itself was underwater, so that boats could be floated in and worked on without having to dry-dock them. So any heat build-up inside the building would've been dissipated in the water, which communicated with the harbor through yard-high gaps between the bottoms of the walls and the foundations of the building, except at the corners, where the pilings supporting walls and roof went straight on down into the bottom of the harbor. And it had a wealth of supplies and equipment on board that he could use – warm clothes, heaters, plenty of food, a distillery for processing fresh water out of seawater, tools useful for repair and maintenance of the boat and its electronics, neatly capped vials filled with nails, screws, bolts, hooks, and the like, and a great big military first-aid kit, which was one of the best things he could ever have found about then.

"Above all, the launch had heaters, a godsend because, when he finally left the sea-cave, the world into which he emerged was freezing cold, cold enough to freeze a man's dick solid and snap it off like a thin plywood lath if he tried peeing into the wind. Black rain almost as acidic as hydrochloric acid, filled with a mixture of sleet, ashes, and unidentifiable char, was coming down hard enough to make the rain that caused Noah's Flood look like high noon on the first day of Summer in the high desert in comparison. What we'd call an 'Impact Winter' had set in, like the Nuclear Winter scenario that Carl Sagan, Paul Ehrlich, and their colleagues came up with back in the early 1980s – the three or four years of snow and heavy rain right after the Two-Day War were a miniature version of it, one that let up much, much sooner than the Impact Winter that followed on the End-Cetaceous Event.

"Thanks to all the dust the impacts had kicked up – not to mention the pall of smoke from the burning of so much of the world's forest and grasslands, and all their cities and industries, as a result of the reentry of the debris from all the impacts, white-hot from atmospheric friction by the time they returned to earth again – so much sunlight was cut off that the temperature dropped to around -50 degrees Fahrenheit in the tropics, where Dawn was at the time, in a world where, on average, temperatures were much higher than in ours, even now. And it was only a couple of weeks after the Summer Solstice in the northern hemisphere! So you can imagine what it was like in the rest of the world," he said, gazing far off into space, at some unimaginably vast, world-devouring catastrophe haunting his mind's eye. "God – so much particulate matter and dark aerosols from the burning of things like foundries and refineries and fuel depots got injected into the atmosphere that it must have taken decades for all of it to rain out! On top of that, the initial impacts themselves sent plumes of dust and other debris so high that some of it was actually kicked into space, where it ended up in the earth's orbit around the Sun – the stuff the astronomers Victor Clube and Bill Napier called 'diamond dust,' suspensions of colloiddally-fine dust with a maximum surface-to-volume ratio, surrounding the Earth, filtering down through its atmosphere, kicking back 30% or more of incoming sunlight into outer space once more. Between those two factors, it must've been like being in a closed meat-locker with no light for God alone knows how long, certainly for many weeks, before the clouds finally began to break up and some sunlight came back again.

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“Dawn – I’ll call him ‘Sneaky Rat,’ because that’s how I think of him now – Sneaky Rat was lucky that the harbor was so close to where his cave was, or he’d never have been able to find it in the dark – or make it there before he froze to death. It was so dark that even at high noon there was almost no natural light at all, and so cold you could have frozen right through within a very short time if you weren’t protected from it by warm clothing, shelter, and a good fire. Sneaky Rat was trained in disciplines closely resembling our Zen and Yoga, and he was able to keep from freezing very nearly by sheer will-power alone before he finally stumbled across the launch, but it was a near thing. An hour or two more and he’d have died, out there in the freezing rain and snow, among the burned-out shells of navy buildings and boats burned to the waterline and bloated, rotting corpses lining the docks and streets everywhere.

“But he did find the launch in time, and when he did, he just crawled into it, sealed it up tight, and turned on its lights and its methane-fueled heaters. He doctored himself using the onboard first-aid kit, which was really more like a whole first-aid station in its own right; drank some water (the launch had a full tank of distilled water; he had an idea that somebody was to have taken the launch out to sea a day or so after what turned out to be the Event, but of course never came around to do so, and that was why it was all ship-shape and ready to go); ate some of the food in the launch’s refrigerators; and then fell into bed, completely exhausted. And then he passed out. Later, he thought he’d slept for at least 24 hours, maybe even longer, while his body did what it could to repair itself.

“When Sneaky Rat awoke, he did feel better – like, only half-dead, instead of two days dead and rotting in the Sun, say – and didn’t hurt quite as much as he had before falling asleep. Slowly, favoring his injuries, he started checking out the boat to see what else it had, and found that there was an excellent onboard navigational computer and a powerful radio, and tape-decks for recording whatever they got off the radio for the logs. He listened to the tapes, and that’s how he found out what had happened and how bad it was.

“There’d been a naval observatory on the island, and they even had observational and communications satellites – that’s how far along they were, Hannah, how advanced their civilization was. The satellites transmitted whatever data they acquired to all sorts of installations, some on the ground and others in space, and some of them were civilian satellites for scientific use. Two of the civilian satellites transmitted pictures of the initial strikes on Europe which they’d filmed, or received from other satellites, straight to the observatory, so the observatory staff were well aware of what was happening by the time the largest impactor came streaking in over the South Atlantic and the Tethyan Seaway on its way to the Yucatán. They started broadcasting in all directions, trying to warn people, telling them to get the hell under cover – they didn’t know exactly what would happen to them all the way out there, on Hunter’s Paradise, so far from North America, but they knew there could be more incoming mail at any time, from any direction. And after the first photographs of the results of the strike on the Yucatán peninsula came in from the comsats, and it was clear they’d all be in for a damned rough ride within at most a few hours after that strike, their broadcasts became even more frantic. The radio on that launch, which must have been a marvel of electronics, picked up every bit of it, at least on the normal audio bands. According to what Sneaky Rat got from the tapes, apparently they were transmitting over television bands, too, but there wasn’t anything aboard the launch to record a TV transmission.

“Which is how Sneaky Rat learned exactly what had happened and how widespread the disaster was. Up until then he’d known that something really bad had happened, especially after he came out to find it dark as the inside of a black cat at midnight and cold as the Ninth Circle of Hell, but not exactly what had been responsible for it, nor how widespread the damage was. Those audio transmission he found in the logs told him exactly what had happened, how extensive the damage from it was, what the likely consequences would be – and that North America, his home, had taken a couple of really bad hits. Hearing those tapes, he knew in his bones that his family, his people, everything and everyone he cared about and loved, were almost certainly all dead, his country a charred, frozen wasteland, all he’d worked for and dreamed of all his life long gone, destroyed by the impacts and their aftermath. . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*To his vast surprise and greater delight – the Lady of Battles was Queen of Heaven and the Greatest Warrior, but even so, Lord Fubar, God of Royal Fuckups, was king of this world – he discovered that the launch had a really good navigational computer, an even better universal computer with a state-of-the-art platform and applications software, a powerful all-band radio, and digital recording capacity for*

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*recording whatever came off the radio for the logs. Getting out a folding chair from the janitor's closet at the back of the galley and setting it up on the operations deck next to the computers, then taking a seat in front of the keyboard of the computer, he began playing "hunt the logs."*

*It didn't take him long to find them – built into the platform, OpenRoad XP, probably the best on the market for any consumer save the federal government, was that handy little program "Adventurer," enabling the user to find every file stored on the computer within seconds or, at the longest, if it was necessary to use the "find file/folder" function, a couple of minutes. As it was, it took him less than two seconds to find the logs – as he went to double-click on the little "Adventurer" shortcut icon on the pretty desktop, a picture of a lovely meadow below rolling hills and a blue sky in which a few pure-white, fluffy little clouds floated, the cursor accidentally hit the "Favorites" shortcut icon, bringing up a list of some twenty folders, one of which, Bingo!, was labeled "Ship's Log."*

*Making sure the computer's speakers were turned on and operational – easily tested by bringing up the "Control Panel" functions, clicking on "Sounds," and trying out a few at random (the speakers worked, all right; the 5-second-long, 200-decibel SHRIEK!!!! that hit him from all sides when he clicked on "Alarm" nearly deafened him until he grabbed the volume-control button and cranked the sound down to a bearable level, then used the "properties" function to turn the damned thing off) – he opened the earliest log-file for the day of the Event, time-stamped at 04:000:00 a.m.<sup>10</sup>*

*As he'd suspected, it wasn't much help. Begun too early in the day, it was a standard log-file in which the launch's captain had recorded only routine data. "Wind, 5 knots. Temperature, 28°. <sup>11</sup> Lovely day, clear skies, clear sailing – as a matter of fact, Chipper is taking *The Lady's Messenger*, his little sailboat, out this morning to test her mettle," said the voice of the almost-certainly-late captain. Dawn could hear the smile in his words – had "Chipper" been his son, or grandson? Someone close to him, surely. Dawn mourned both of them, whoever they were. Though he'd never met them in person, like the rest of dromanity,<sup>12</sup> they shared nearly all their genes with him, and vice-versa, and both, like him, were children of the Gods. "Looks like a good day for it," the voice continued, still cheerful. "Everything normal. Signing out until next update, probably around noon – not much to do today except read, what with the holiday and all."*

*That's right, Dawn thought grimly, it had been a holiday, that terrible day. A minor one, the Dedication of Masha, a minor saint's day, one kept religiously only by those whose patron saint Masha was. Wasn't he been the patron of hod-carriers, or barnacle-scrapers, or some damn thing like that? Never have been able to keep track of them all – though by now, Masha is probably patron saint of no one. Still, a good excuse for goofing off. Oh, well, let's see what's in the next file . . .*

*He didn't have far to look. The next log-file, time-stamped at 17 minutes past noon, just as the captain had predicted, turned out to be the jackpot.*

*It began, like the earlier one, with a report of wind-speed, temperature, the weather out in the harbor – still lovely – and another mention of "Chipper." Yes, here it was. Chipper was the captain's third son by his first wife, now grown to near-manhood, about to undergo his Acceptance-of-Manhood rites. The captain, whose name, from the business card Dawn had found, for some reason left on the desk that held the computer keyboard, was Sir Rose-Colored Sunset Sailor's Luck, Commander-Second and Chief of Operations at Gingko Base, Hunter's Paradise, Son-of-Far-Striding-Lunarnaut (An astronaut's kid! My Gods! Small world, literally!) Second-Born of the Delta Clans, called "Red" by his friends. Clearly Chipper was Red's favorite child. Now Red began to wind it up, saying, "I'm really looking forward to this afternoon – I still have about 31 pages left to go of that new novel by "Grass" Son-of-"Scribbler"-First-Scribe-and-Battle-Chief, *Far the Winds of Vengeance*, bet I can get that in before time for the next – holy Gods, what the fuck is that?!"*

*An ear-shattering squeal interrupted whatever Red had been about to follow that with. Then, as the squeal (thank all the Gods!) dropped out, to be replaced with a low-volume, intermittent chatter-squeal-chatter-chatter Dawn couldn't place – it sounded like the sort of static you got when setting up communications equipment too near a leaky nuclear reactor, he thought with a wince, remembering that fucking horrible campaign he'd been assigned back in Siberus, all those years ago – Red's voice returned, saying: "Savior of Man, we're being bombarded! Somebody's declared war on us! I – what?"*

*Another voice in the background, barely discernible: "It ain't no war, Chief – we've been hit by a bunch of fuckin' great rocks from outer space!"*



“Steg?”

“S me, Chief,” *said a bedraggled-sounding voice. From the overtones, the newcomer must’ve been one of those big, hearty, competent souls who, if they aren’t killed in battle first, generally rise to the position of Master Sergeant in the Army or Marines, or Chief Petty Officer in the Navy (but we all know the one about the radio announcer with the whipcord-thin, iron-thewed voice who stands 5’x 5’x 5’ and weighs enough to break any chair he sits in, don’t we?).* “Just came in at headquarters – they think it was a swarm of comets. Four land-strikes we know of, two on North Sandstone, maybe one of ’em the Southern Tongue, or near it, out in the ocean, we ain’t sure yet, and two more on Siberus.” Now Steg’s voice was much closer, and much clearer – too clear. Dawn dreaded Steg’s next words, almost presciently sure of what he’d say. “The rest hit the drink, all of ’em, they think. Three or four in Ocean-of-the-Dawn, and about that many, maybe more, in Ocean-of-the-Sunset.”

*A loud groan – Red’s. Then:* “Savior! Are you sure, Steg?”

“Chief, I wish like hell I wasn’t, but we got that straight from the top, just came in from what’s left of North Sandstone.” *Now Steg’s voice was so close and clear that he had to be standing right by Red.*

“Steg, do you know . . . do you know if Chipper –?”

“Dunno, Chief. Was he out today?”

“I – he had to’ve been. You know he . . . takes Messenger out every chance he gets. There’d have been nothing to keep him from going – he gets . . . gets up at the crack of dawn on good days, grabs a bite to eat and heads straight down to the harbor to take her out for a sail.”

“I . . . oh, hell, Chief, he’s probably all right.” *But Steg’s hearty voice was edged with uncertainty – and underlain with a sick, poisonous certainty: out there, on the unprotected ocean, Chipper had about the chance of a snowball in the hottest of the Hells.*

*His voice increasingly shaky, somehow keeping his focus on his job, Red asked Steg, “What’s the observatory say?” He was referring to the naval observatory on Hunter’s Paradise, which had access to the many observational and communications satellites which North Sandstone had in orbit around the planet. Those satellites transmitted data on everything from meteorological phenomena to information of possible significance as military intelligence to every one of North Sandstone’s many military installations. The observatory also kept track of the countless swarms of civilian satellites, such as those used to collect scientific data and those used to relay telephone and Internet traffic over long distances, and, after processing and analyzing whatever it got from these, in turn relayed the results to military installations, scientific centers, and numerous civilian institutions, such as research universities and museums.*

“Well, sir, if your computer was on, it should’ve received a transmission from them. You wanna take a look, see if that came in?”

“Sure . . .”

*A pause, while Red played “hunt-the-encrypted-file.” Then, softly, reverently:* “Savior. Oh, Savior!”

*The digital photos, originally taken in orbit by military satellites, and relayed on by the observatory to authorized receivers, of which Red was one, had indeed reached the launch’s computers via the standard narrow-band ship-to-shore and shore-to-shore transmissions from the observatory.*

*The first enormous bolide had come streaking in over the southern reaches of Ocean-of-the-Sunrise,<sup>13</sup> impacting the ocean just off the western coast of Laur.<sup>14</sup> It was followed by several ocean strikes progressively farther and farther west, then one that had impacted deep in North Sandstone’s heartland and another that had flashed over the Tethyan Seaway<sup>15</sup> on its way to the Bight of Summer Winds<sup>16</sup> off the Southern Tongue.<sup>17</sup> Following those, five or six bolides had impacted Ocean-of-the-Sunset,<sup>18</sup> strike after strike ranging farther and farther west. The series of strikes ended with two titanic impacts on Siberus.<sup>19</sup> The horrified observatory staff had watched it all. Unable to wrench their stricken eyes from the unblinking, unrepentant video screens, letting their training take over and do the job that couldn’t have been done at all save on automatic, they reported it all in excruciating detail:*

“Strike off Laur Two-Basin! I say again, strike off Laur Two-Basin!”

“Strike on Salmon Shoals off Laur! I say again, strike on Salmon Shoals off Laur!”

“Strike on Shark Island, midway Ocean-of-the-Sunrise!”

“Strike . . .”

“Savior – look at the doppler on that thing!”

“Strike . . .”

“Strike . . .”

*And then, the one he dreaded above all:*

“Strike in the Heartland! Oh, Gods . . .” *A single throat-burning, lung-tearing, heart-crushing sob.*

*Then:* “I say again, strike in the North Sandstone Heartland!”

“Coordinates?”

*Whoever had announced the strike gave a position that translated as, thanks be to the Lady of Battles, several hundred miles west of Broken-Tree Bay, and somewhat south of it, off the Southern Tongue.*

“Are you – oh, shit! Strike in the Bight of Summer Winds! Strike in the Bight of Summer Winds! Might be blowback, detritus thrown out from the strike off the Southern Tongue!” cried another voice, its owner losing all sense of professionalism as his words dissolved into a series of weak, choked cries, like those of some small prey animal impaled on the teeth of a giant carnosaur.

Fuck, oh, fuck, Father of Darkness! *Dawn thought, molten lead and liquid helium battling for supremacy somewhere in his bowels.*

*As the last voice deteriorated into broken sobs, another one took over:* “Strike in the Ocean-of-the-Sunset off Golden-Sunglow Bay, North Sandstone!”

“Strike in the Ocean-of-the-Sunset on Golden Shoals! I say again, strike in the Ocean-of-the-Sunset on Golden Shoals!”

“Strike . . .”

“Strike . . .”

*Farther and farther west came the strikes.*

*Finally:*

“Strike on Siberus! I say again, strike on Siberus, on the Fisher’s Tongue!”

*A heavy groan, and:* “Oh, God – my mother’s mother’s people were Siberussians!” That was Red.

“Oh, shit, Chief, I’m so sorry, so sorry . . .” *Steg speaking. Dawn could feel Steg’s hand reaching out, clasping his superior’s shoulder, giving it a very gentle squeeze.*

“Another strike on Siberus, by Lake-of-Bones!” *cried a different voice – another astronomer.* “I say again, strike on Siberus, by Lake-of-Bones!”

*All this time, the faithful shipboard computer had been recording both the observatory transmission and the voices of Steg and Red – apparently Red had forgotten to turn off the recording function, and everything was picked up by the computer and put together on the same track. Red must have accidentally clicked on the “Full-track” function.*

*A long, long pause. Then a voice from the observatory, almost bursting with relief:* “That’s the last, looks like.”

“Thank all the Gods! Are we –“

**Sqeeaaaaa!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!-POP!**

*Another, longer pause. Then:*

“Shit fire and save the matches, Chief – I think the observatory just bit the Big One!”

“Savior! Steg – you stay here. That’s an order. This concrete pillbox we’re in should keep out everything but a direct hit from a nuke. I used to hate these damned concrete boat-bunkers – not any more!”

“What . . . do you think happened to them, Chief?”

“Something big, hot, and attitudinous landed on them. Blowback from . . . whatever it was, maybe.”

“You think maybe they got nuked, sir?”

“Naw . . . we’re not all that far from them. If it’d been a nuke, believe me, son, you and I wouldn’t be sitting here in front of this computer. The shockwave alone – damn! Forgive me, Steg, I’m rambling. Not good,” *said Red, his voice weary, shaky, sounding as old as Dawn felt. A deep breath – didn’t the man know his every word, every sound he made was being recorded? Or maybe he didn’t care. Would I? thought Dawn, astonished to find he found the idea amusing, that he could find anything amusing after what had happened to him, to the world – above all, to North Sandstone, where his family and, oh, Star! beloved! lived, had lived for generations. Broken-Tree Bay. Star. Star. His home. His home . . .*

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*Now Captain Red said:* “Shit, I’ve had the log on all this time. Oh, well . . . whoever might be listening to this, if anyone is, by now you can assume I’m . . . no longer able to keep this log up, or any other damned thing. Otherwise I’d have had your scurvy ass thrown in the brig for breaking into Navy quarters without authorization,” *he said, with a sudden, shaky laugh.* Dear God, he’s close to cracking up, *thought Dawn.* No, dammit, that’s his way of letting off the pressure so he can hold on, do what he has to do . . .

“All right, listen up,” *Red said, so direct and firm that Dawn flinched backwards in his chair – it was as if Red could see him there, were talking directly to him. And so the Chief Officer was – not to Dawn per se, of course, but to whomever might be sitting in the Chief’s chair, listening to the log. It was as if the man somehow knew – and, thought Dawn, cold-hot shivers racing up and down his spine, maybe he did know. Maybe the Lady told him . . .*

*The Lady of Battles present and attending or not, Red’s voice continued, after another deep breath, steadying himself:* “Whoever you are, I’ve stored the whole Observatory transmission in folder ‘Lady B,’ with the label ‘Winter of the Gods.’ There’re photos that came with it, too – those are in the same folder, graphics files – you can see what they are from the attribute codes at the end of their labels (I just changed the viewing specs on everything on the hard-drive so that nothing is hidden, and you can see it all – security just doesn’t matter any more, does it?). The file-names will tell you more or less what each one is about – and you can get the chronology using the Properties function.” *You’d never know, now, from his deep, steady voice, one long-used to commanding men, just how close he’d been to the raw, ragged edges of total breakdown only a minute or two before.* “I believe there are graphics files in there showing the bits and pieces that’ve come down since the initial strikes, blowback and all, including any on this facility. That’ll tell you the sort of damage we took here – well, I suppose you’ve seen that up close and personal yourself by now, but those’ll give you some idea of what’s left, what’s safe to check out, what isn’t.

“By now, too, you’ll know that the whole world’s taken one helluva hit. Or *several* hits, from Hell’s very snowballs – those were comets, they said, and comets are huge dirty snowballs, mountains welded together with ice as cold as The Lord of Evil’s own balls. They break up coming down, partly due to getting caught up in a planet’s gravity-well, but also due to atmospheric entry – my dad was an astronomer-astronaut, and his daddy before him was one of the greatest astronomers this world has ever known, Sir Sunrise-on-Yama-Samedi\* Son-of-Strikes-the-Sky First-Born-of-the-Sky-Rovers, and I learned astronomical science from them both, you see, so I know what I’m talking about. Anyway, comets break up even before impact – when they hit atmosphere, all that ice starts to flash-boil, and then you have a whole bunch of mountains coming at you, drifting as the planet turns under them.

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\*Pluto.

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“And when they hit – well, they think that’s what caused the Permian Catastrophe, the one that almost did in everything alive on Earth, around one and a half billion<sup>20</sup> years ago. Something big hit Vierex, the big peninsula that sticks up from Transantarctos<sup>21</sup> (awful thing, how many people today don’t know their geography! That’s for you knaves who don’t know enough to pound rocks, so you have a clue as to where it hit – unless your schooling was even worse than the usual nowadays, and you don’t know where Transantarctos is!), and when it hit, it shattered, and in the process raised an Almighty huge lot of dust, chunks of rock, you name it, blowback from the strike. That strike was so powerful that a lot of the blowback was actually sent back up into the sky, clear into the stratosphere. And when it came down again, falling through the air, because of air-resistance, it heated up until it was hot as Hell.

“On top of that, the shockwaves from that infernal strike went through the Earth’s crust all the way around the planet until they converged on a spot 264<sup>o22</sup> away from where the comet or asteroid or whatever it was hit, right under a piece of land that eventually became today’s Siberus. Like now, there were subduction zones along Siberus’s coast – you could say the place was primed to blow. And blow it did when those shockwaves hit it, fountains of lava erupting from it so powerful that the tops of ’em touched the stratosphere. Think of somebody who gets shot in the back of the head. It’s easy to miss that nice, neat, tiny hole in the back of the head from a high-caliber hollowpoint round – at first, it’s that huge, fuckin’ messy hole in the forehead gets everybody’s attention. Somebody who didn’t know to look farther might

take the big hole in the forehead for the cause of death, rather than that little hard-to-see hole at the back. The same way, a lot of scientists used to argue over whether the hit on Vierex or the Siberian volcanism was the cause of the Permian Catastrophe, but now they realize it was both: first, the strike on Vierex, which set off those shockwaves, which triggered the volcanism that followed.

“After that, the volcanism started dying down, but it took a long time for it to come to a full stop, a hundred million<sup>23</sup> years or more, they think. And for most of that time the toxic gases they gave off, combining with the oxygen in the air, caused atmospheric free oxygen to drop so low that almost everything died.

“Plus, it was dark as in the inside of The Devil’s heart for a lot of that time, due to all the dust and other crud that the initial strike raised. And it was hot – so much carbon dioxide was vented from all that volcanism along the coasts of Siberus that a Greenhouse Effect was started up that almost did for our world what happened to Venus about 5 and a half billion years ago.<sup>24</sup> If it had kept up much longer, it would have done that, and our world really would have turned into a bake-oven like Venus is now, and stayed that way. All in all, a fuckin’ nasty one-two-three-four sucker punch that accounts quite neatly for why all life almost died out completely back then. Plus, there was rampant disease, epidemic diseases of all kinds as well as organic conditions such as cardiac failure and endocrinological collapse, among the larger animals, and vascular collapse and mitochondrial degeneration among plants, mostly due to all that stress – well, enough of that. You can see what I mean.

“Some recent paleontological findings raise the question of whether that earlier world, the Permian, which gave birth to our own, had some sort of civilization,” Red said, his voice softening, becoming musing and wistful. “The most telling finds had to do with a stratum of weird rock they found in Deccan<sup>25</sup> last year, comprising an amalgam of elemental lead, tin, zinc, iron, copper, silver, gold, and other industrially useful metals in a matrix of the sort of sedimentary rock that might originally have been marshlands soil, and another like it in a part of Transantarctos<sup>26</sup> that was close to the South Pole back then. You’d never find such an accumulation of metals occurring naturally, and it makes you wonder. They’ve also discovered jumbles of fossils in Late Permian-level strata in Deccan that came from creatures which would normally never have been found together, such as small tropical marine fish, somewhat larger freshwater fish, insects from the tropics, amphibians from a completely different part of the tropics, miniature pelycosaurs like nothing we’d ever found before, a gorgonopsid or two, lizard-like reptiles – creatures from all over, the sort of assortment you might find in a zoo – or a pet store. There were also similarly catholic collections of fossilized plant material, giant horsetail ferns mixed in with primitive conifers, cycads, bryophytes, some species that looked like nothing on Earth and could well have been ornamentals of some sort, and a host of other plants which were common in the Permian but which, in most cases, have long since died out, all thrown together higgledy-piggledy in a way they’d never have been in a natural setting. Were those phytofossil beds all that were left of some Permian zoo or arboretum? We’ll never know, not for sure, but it makes you wonder, it really does . . .

“Anyway,” he said, the hard edges returning to his voice, as if he had made a strong effort to restore that hard-won high focus to his mind and mission, “as I speak into the microphone here, shit from those strikes that just hit us is starting to rain down on us – the same thing must be happening all over the world, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. They must be putting it out on video – not our observatory here on the island, not if they took the hit I think they just did, but observatories in other places, such as the northern territories of North Sandstone, their opposite numbers in Siberus, at the new university in our colony in Eastern Gond, the research stations in Transantarctos, lots of places. I just set the onboard receivers to pick up anything coming over the cables from them or other installations, and if anything is coming in, this computer is storing it in folder ‘Lady B,’ sub-folder ‘Incoming.’

“As for me . . . well, my boy Chipper’s out there somewhere on the ocean in his sweet little boat, The Lady’s Messenger. The Gods willing, he’s still alive, and trying to get home to port here. So I’m going to do everything possible to find him, first checking the harbor, using one of those little Harborwatch putt-putts, see if he’s come in. If not, I’ll come back and take out The Luck of the Lady – that’s my launch, the one I’m sitting in now, recording this log – and go find him. Somehow.

“It’s all on disk for whoever wants to look at it. Look it over and weep, friend. Me and Steg are going to find Chipper and Steg’s family – they’re all based here, too. This is Commander Son-of-Far-Striding-Lunamaut Second-Born of the Delta Clans signing off from The Luck of the Lady. May all the good Gods bless and keep you, and make Their Countenances to shine upon you.”

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*And it was over – Dawn had a feeling that Red had signed off then so that his unknown audience wouldn't hear the sobs that were already threatening to shatter the iron control he had won back over his emotions with titanic effort. Over . . .*

*But it wasn't. Not yet. His heart heavy as plutonium and just as toxic in his chest, Dawn began to hunt through "Lady B" for the graphics and movie files Red had mentioned. Red and Steg had never returned from their quest – a quest both men must have known by then was hopeless, but had to attempt nevertheless, for everything that had made their lives worth living was out there, at the mercy of whatever horrendous catastrophe had overtaken the world, and if they couldn't find their loved ones, even if they themselves survived, why bother returning? Why bother going on?*

*The same question haunting him, fighting the temptation to follow their example by getting up from his chair and out of the launch and end his agony of spirit somewhere out there in the murdered world, as they must have, Dawn opened up Lady B/Incoming, and one by one began bringing up the movie files that had come in from the observatory.*

*Though Red hadn't had time to wade through those files, he had known what they would show: streaks of red-white fire coming down through atmosphere (in a few cases, the films ended right there as the satellites transmitting them were knocked off-line by electromagnetic damage or simply smashed to bits due to the close passage of one of the bolides), followed by vast, spreading disks of blinding white when the bolides impacted the ground or the ocean, from which boiled up sky-clawing pillars of fire in a thousand different colors, intertwined coils of lightning ramifying through them from sky to ground and back again. More and more satellites went off-line, the films they had been transmitting ending right there as the blowback knocked them out of the sky, burned up their electronic guts with electromagnetic overload, and slapped them this way and that with fists of red-hot junk lofted up from the burning Earth below.*

*Dawn sank down in the captain's chair as he watched the satellite films on the computer screen, his spirits falling deeper and deeper as he watched the strikes, one after the other, marching east-to-west from the western shores of Laur across the world, all the way to the eastern shores and heartland of Siberus, each bolide hitting a little farther west than the last as the turning Earth obligingly presented more and more of itself to the heavenly barrage. Dear Gods, it's as if somebody took a cosmic machine-gun and kept shooting at the Earth while he held the aim steady and the target kept moving! One slug after another . . .*

*One bolide after another, one impact after another, one vast, boiling, blazing wound after another in the vulnerable body of Mother Earth. Gods! O Gods! He was weeping as much for the whole world as he was for his homeland and loved ones. The Earth, the good Earth, that nourished and cherished them all, provided for them all, that had birthed them and loved them all for some forty billion years,<sup>27</sup> the Earth was being shot to pieces before his eyes like someone being hosed by a machine-gun! Laur, the Ocean-of-the-Sunrise, North Sandstone and the Southern Tongue, Bight of Summer Winds, Ocean-of-the-Sunset, Siberus, one after another, taking hit after hit after hit after hit from the worst of the blowback as well as the cometary bodies . . .*

*He might have greyed out for a while, still conscious, but running more or less on automatic, helplessly taking it all in the way the Earth Herself had taken that cannon-fire from the heavens. But one thought stood out even as the rest of his thinking self faded far into the darkness: Siberus. Siberus was hit. Laur was hit. North Sandstone was hit. That means it wasn't anyone on Earth who did this. Unless somebody from the colonies on Red-eye, or maybe Big Stripes' Moons . . . but who? Who would do such an evil thing? How could anyone – no, this wasn't an act of war.*

*Or was it?*

*Dear Gods, was it?*

*Then he was rising again toward the light – such as it was – rising back up to find himself on the operations deck, at the computer, the sign-off icon of the last video fading from view. Was it an act of war?*

*Would he ever know?*

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Sneaky Rat came close to giving up right then and there," said Paul. "He would have done so – except for a sudden noise that came to him from down in the galley, a scratching, scabbling sound. He limped*

down to the galley – he'd been lying on a bunk, covered up with blankets for warmth, half-asleep, despondently thinking over the dreadful messages of the tapes, when he heard the noise – to find himself confronting a tiny, half-frozen, three-quarters starved, terrified little 'rat-weasel,' a mammal of the sort his kids had made pets of all the time at home, that he'd had for a pet himself when he was a tad.

"There he was, towering over the little creature, which he could easily have crushed in one hand, locking gazes with it. It glared at him out of furious little red eyes, the dun-and-black hair all over its body bristling until it looked like a four-footed, animated bottle-brush on a very bad-hair day, dancing a war dance all over the galley. Its right forepaw was missing; the stump was crusted over and oozing a slow trickle of blood. At least half of its fur had been burned off in great patches, and it had several ugly burns on its back and sides and head. It was so dinged up that it was a wonder it was still on its feet – but it seemed to have the energy of three healthy versions of its kind, all of it focused on him in the form of raw fury. And then, rearing up on its back legs, it hissed like a snake and screamed a challenge at him, just as if he'd been another of its kind, trying to invade its territory.

"Clearly it was willing to battle him to the death to defend whatever tiny island of safety it had found for itself on that boat. How it had gotten in there was a mystery Sneaky Rat never solved – the creatures were very, very resourceful and clever, and it could have sneaked aboard before the Event, when the big doors at the front of the concrete pen were open for one reason or another, or might even have been aboard for a long time, a stowaway from one or another far-away port, or a pet of some lonely sailor which somehow managed to jump ship and climb aboard this launch. It could even have been Red's pet – or maybe of his son, Skipper, though that seemed unlikely. The island didn't really support a lot of mammals, large or small, and wherever the little creature had come from, it was likely its original home wasn't anywhere near Hunter's Paradise. Such animals almost invariably came to Hunter's Paradise as hitch-hikers aboard water or air transport, the exceptions usually being pets belonging to the households of military personnel stationed there, or kept in office buildings as a sort of free, live-in, vermin-abatement service.

"Wherever the animal had come from, it had all the guts in the world, judging from its enraged challenge, which sounded like battle-maddened teakettle out to make war on the whole world. Maybe it didn't have much in the way of common sense, but it had lived through the same nightmarish week or so he had, when everything and everyone else Sneaky Rat had come across outside of the sea-cave he'd taken refuge in from the Event was dead, usually in some messily nasty way, from the palms and other plant-life for which Hunter's Paradise had been famous, to the birds, the small dinosaurs that roamed the island's hills, the insects, and all its other natural life-forms, to all the military personnel and civilians in residence there. Like Dawn, the little mammal was a badly injured survivor all alone in a horrifyingly changed world – and Sneaky Rat found himself grinning at its sheer chutzpah and guts, deeply touched by its gallant bravery.

"On top of everything else, the animal was a specimen of his totem animal. As I said before, his religion was something like Shinto crossed with Buddhism, with Australian aborigine and native American religions and a lot of other things thrown into the mix – I suppose the anthropologists would call him a cross between an animist and a polytheist. The fact that this tiny little fellow survivor was an avatar of his totem really did mean something to him, a clear sign to him from the Gods, though he still wasn't sure exactly what the message They were sending him might be. 'Well, hello there, Little Sneaky Rat,' he told it. 'I'm Big Sneaky Rat, and there's plenty here for both of us. Let me get into the galley, here, and I'll fix us both something good to eat, what do you say?'

"The little beast stared up at him, clearly puzzled, maybe not expecting somebody so friendly-sounding. Experimentally, Sneaky Rat stepped over it to get into the galley, and it just went on staring at him as he got some food from the cupboards and the little refrigerator in the galley and began making something to eat. As Sneaky Rat worked on the food, he began tossing bits of meat and seeds and other things from the meal he was preparing to the little animal. It snatched up the first few bits he threw to it and ran off with them to a corner, then came back to check out the rest. Pretty soon Sneaky Rat had made himself a meal and was sitting down at the little table at the back of the galley to eat it, and the little mammal was sitting in the middle of the floor, happily chowing down on some of the food he'd given it.

"The first to finish its meal, the little creature started rounding up the bits it hadn't eaten, porting them back to the corner that it had clearly staked out for now as its home aboard the boat and adding them to the small stash of food he'd already accumulated up there. By the time Sneaky Rat had eaten his fill, the little stowaway had tidied up the floor completely and disappeared into the opening between the basboards and

the cupboards where it had chosen to lair up in. Sneaky Rat put down a pan of water for the animal, then went back to bed.

“In the middle of the night, Sneaky Rat awoke to find the little creature curled up next to him on the bed, making little whimpering noises, from time to time dabbing at its eyes with its uninjured forepaw. It looked and sounded just like a little kid crying heart-brokenly over the loss of its parents or a sister or brother – I mean, like a human child, because Mesozoic people sounded and expressed themselves somewhat differently than we would have. But clearly it was a very unhappy little animal, one that had been through six or seven dozen kinds of hell, and had probably lost its entire world, too, right before its eyes. I’ve seen Big Bill’s ferrets do that sort of thing when they’re grieving, say, when a jill loses one of her babies or her husband, and it’s enough to scare you out of a year’s growth, they sound so *human*.

“Very carefully, so as not to startle the animal, Sneaky Rat reached out his hand and began to stroke it. It just began crying all the harder, its little body shaking with its sobs. He kept on stroking it until finally it ran out of tears and energy and fell asleep. When it began to make tiny little snores, curled up there beside him just like the pet rat-weasels that had slept on his bed with him when he was a kid, he went back to sleep himself.

“The next morning, when he woke up, Sneaky Rat found the little animal still sleeping there beside him, looking totally wiped out and exhausted . . .”

## **Chapter 4: Lonesome Traveler**

*Getting out of bed very carefully, trying not to wake up the rat-weasel in the process, Dawn went to the head and relieved himself. Then, after stripping and washing himself down with a washcloth and water from the tap in the sink, he dressed himself in thermal underwear, a heavy seaman’s sweater, canvas trousers, big, heavy boots, and a watch-cap, standard wear for seamen in cold weather, that he’d found aboard among the ship’s stores, along with lots of other, lighter clothing. He wanted to depend on the launch’s heaters as little as possible so that he could conserve methane that was their fuel, because there was no guarantee he’d be able to stock more methane any time soon.*

*Then he limped his way up to the galley, to fix something to eat – and found his furry little ship’s mate dancing all around him, making lots of sharp little cries the way the creatures did when they were excited and anticipating something good.*

“Oh, you want some breakfast, too, do you?” Dawn asked his new companion. “Okay, there’s plenty for both of us. Come on down to the galley with me and let’s fix something for us to eat.” *Chuckling and making more excited noises, the animal followed him into the galley. He cooked up an omelet from the eggs of a Proto, a little chicken-sized dinosaur that had been domesticated for its eggs and meat – there were a lot of eggs in the galley’s refrigerator and he didn’t know how long they’d keep, so Dawn decided to eat them up first, before using up very much of the less perishable food stored there. Then, spreading hydrogenated oil on some of the big, flat, unleavened crackers he found in a cupboard, and pouring a glass of protomeso milk for himself and a bowl of it for his new friend (the protomeso, the source of the milk, was one of the larger mammals that had been recently domesticated; the Navy always got the best, first, long before the civilian sector did), Sneaky Rat took these along with the omelet over to the galley’s cramped table, where he and the rat-weasel settled down to eat their breakfast together. He put the rat-weasel’s portion of omelet in a saucer and set it on the table next to his own plate of food, and waited to see what the little animal would do. It jumped right up there on the table and tucked into the food he’d set out there for it, looking up at him appreciatively from time to time as it gobbled it all down. So he put the bowl of milk there next to the saucer of omelet, too, and the weasel-rat drank the bowl dry within a minute or so, then looked around for more.*

“Hungry little fella, ain’tcha?” he asked it. “Here, have some more eggs.” *It gobbled down the bits of omelet he gave it as if it were starved, even though he’d fed it pretty well the night before.* “Poor little devil, you’ve really been through the wars, haven’t you?” he asked it.

“Yeek!” *it told him.*

“Well, maybe you’ll get a chance to fill out now and heal up some,” he told it. “Think you’d be willing to let me take a look at those burns and that leg of yours?”

“Yik-yik-yik?” *it asked him apprehensively.*

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“Oh, it’ll hurt a little, but you’ll feel a lot better after I put some ointment on you and dress that wound. What do you say?”

“Er . . . er . . . neep . . .” *it told him, thinking it over. It burped, then looked up at him, making up its mind. Finally, it walked across the table and jumped down beside him on the bench he was sitting on. He put a hand down to stroke it, and it sat there, shivering a little – clearly it was nervous at the idea of being touched by such a huge being as himself, even after all the good food he’d given it, and having slept with him the night before – making little churring noises from time to time.*

*When the rat-weasel had calmed down again, he picked it up very carefully and carried it with him out of the galley, into the hallway leading to the bunkrooms and the stairs going topside, where the big first-aid kit was located. Setting the little animal down on the floor beside him where he squatted there, next to the first-aid kit, he opened the kit and got out what he needed to tend his new friend’s injuries. When he looked down to see if the animal was still there, it was, though it still shivered apprehensively. He told the creature, “Okay, friend, this is going to sting a little, but I’ll try to hurt you as little as possible, okay?”*

*It pressed its furry head against Sneaky Rat’s leg, the way teacup pet coelurosaurs did when they were being affectionate, and he took that to mean “Yes.” So, picking the animal up, he began tending its wounds, cleaning it up with hydrogen peroxide and rubbing alcohol, dressing its injured foreleg and its burns with medications and bandages from the kit. It suffered his attentions, never quite panicking or resisting him – it didn’t like what he was doing, but seemed to know he meant it well and knew the purpose behind the things he was doing to it, and put up with Sneaky Rat’s ministrations until the man was done.*

“Okay, I think we’re done for now,” *Sneaky Rat told him – a quick inspection of the little animal’s nether regions made it clear that the beast was a complete male. “Maybe you’d like to lie down and take a nap for a while, while I start looking over the charts and see what we’re going to do next.” Lying limp in his hand, the mammal just stared at him, looking miserable and a bit like a clown because of the bandages with which Sneaky Rat had dressed his wounds . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“Sneaky Rat made a bed for the mammal in the chart-room, where he could keep an eye on it while he checked out the data stored on the ship’s computers,” said Paul. “He already had an idea of what he wanted to do next – the launch, which was powered by enormous hydrogen-cell, fully-charged batteries, had an effective range of something like ten thousand miles (God, I hope Yuri can get the details of how those batteries worked out of me – some principle we’ve never thought of, you can store an enormous amount of power in those things! If we can get that up out of my unconscious memories, Yeats or Norwich or somebody can build the things, and we’ll have power to burn)! That was more than enough to take him home, which was the only place he really wanted to be. Maybe his people were all gone, maybe some had survived – but if he was going to find any of them, and find out exactly what had happened to his homeland, he’d have to actually go there, in person. According to the naval observatory’s broadcasts, the comsats had all been knocked out of the sky or rendered useless by the crud that had been hoisted into orbit by the impacts, and as far as they could tell, nobody was broadcasting on the surface anywhere except themselves. Within a few hours of the last great strike on Siberia, it was as if the whole world had died, or at least been rendered blind and dumb, no way to know what was happening anywhere except by actually going there. So he decided to go home or die trying . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Barring unforeseen difficulties, the shipboard computers had inertial-guidance programs that could take Dawn safely from Hunter’s Paradise, in the Eastern Gond--Laurussian portion of the Tethyan Seaway, south of Laurussia and a tad north of Eastern Gond and Deccan, to North Sandstone. All he had to do was enter the coordinates of his current location and the place he wanted to go, and the computers would work out the most cost-effective route there. From maps he ran off on the printer, he got the coordinates and entered them into the computer, which quickly calculated an optimal route for him. In fact, there were some small islands scattered across the ocean separating North Sandstone from Eastern*



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*Gond, which the Navy used as fuel depots and supply stations. He could replenish his stores, and even pick up a new hydrogen-cell battery there if he needed one, assuming the stations were still intact and their stores were unharmed, and the route chosen by the computer came close enough to them. So he programmed in stopovers at every one of those islands – he could change that later, once he'd reached the first couple of islands and had some idea of whether it would be worth his while visiting any of the others. If even one of those supply dumps was intact, it could make the difference between getting home and being stranded out at sea, perishing there when he ran out of provisions and fuel.*

*Then he felt something pawing at his sweater. Looking down, he saw that rather than having gone to sleep, as he'd hoped, the weasel-rat was up and about, and wanted to join him. Standing on the table with its hind legs, it was clinging to his sweater with its good left forepaw, looking up at him beseechingly.*

*“You lonely, little fella?” he asked the little creature.*

*“Yeek!” the mammal told him, and then whimpered a little, a sound that reminded him the sobs he'd heard coming from him the night before.*

*“Okay, I can understand that. Come on, it's okay, you can sit anywhere you want here,” he told him.*

*The little animal promptly darted up onto his shoulder, perching there proudly. He chuckled a little.*

*“I guess I'd better give you a name, hadn't I?” he told him. “What shall we call you, then?”*

*“Yip!” his new friend replied . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“As it happened,” said Paul, “‘Yip’ was a homophone for a real word in Sneaky Rat's own language meaning ‘messenger’ or ‘message’ – or ‘divine messenger.’ The mammal who was the boon companion of the Lady of Battles, Sneaky Rat's tutelary Goddess, had that name. This was the most powerful of omens – and a fortunate one. ‘All right, then,’ Dawn told his new furry friend, ‘your name is “Yip.” Welcome aboard, Yip. I appreciate the company,’ he told the creature, holding his hand up to the mammal. Yip licked the tips of his fingers, the way a ferret or dog will, to show affection. Yip had almost certainly been someone's pet before he'd somehow come aboard the launch. If so, how betrayed by the Event the poor little fellow must have felt, losing all his people-family and any companions of his own kind in a few horrifying moments, losing one of his hands and being so badly burned the way he had been, suffering for days all alone in that stygian cold and world-devouring darkness! It was a miracle he'd survived at all. Perhaps he'd been out and about the neighborhood, allowed to run loose during the daytime, as so many people did their pets, and had come down here to the marina, where he'd found the boat. He'd gone exploring in it just about the time the Event took place, and was stranded there in the aftermath of the Event. Sneaky Rat couldn't imagine how the poor little guy could have made it, otherwise . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Somehow, after that, things didn't look quite as bad to Dawn as they had before. For the first time in many days he felt his spirits lift. Before, though the antics of the little rat-weasel had at times amused him, Dawn had mostly just gone through the motions of living, not sure it was even worth trying any more. But somehow the little mammal had given him a shot of cheer, even hope. If something that tiny and banged-up could have survived the horrific catastrophe that had overtaken their world, then there was hope that at least some of Dawn's own kind would have made it through, somehow, somewhere, back in his homeland.*

“Okay, Yip, soon as I make sure we're all ship-shape, we'll start for home. – My home, that is. I don't know where your home is, but there's a lot like you back where I came from, and maybe we can find you some companions of your own kind there. What do you say to that, my friend?”

*“Yeek!” Yip cheered.*

“So it's unanimous. We'll take off as soon as I check off everything here and make sure we're all copasetic.”

*Three days later they were good to go – it took an extra day to lever those big concrete doors open wide enough to allow the launch to leave the barn where it had sheltered through the worst of it. Dawn fired up the launch's engines. Then, when the engines were turning over without strain, slowly, carefully,*

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*he piloted it out of the barn; through the debris- and corpse-choked harbor channels, which were filled with a putrid, toxic soup of floating, rotting carcasses of men, women, children, and animals of all descriptions, the smashed rubble of what had been homes and businesses, and a stew of industrial chemicals from the harborside businesses that had been reduced to charred wreckage by the aftermath of the Event; and out to sea.*

*It was still pitch-dark day and night, even at those low latitudes, when they at last reached the ocean that surrounded Hunter's Paradise. There the computer took over, setting the boat on a programmed heading that would take it northward, through the islands beyond Hunter's Paradise, on up to the Tethyan Seaway, then into the Seaway itself, heading for the Atlantic Ocean and North Sandstone – and Dawn's home.*

*How they'd made it as far as the ocean without incident, what with all the flotsam, organic and otherwise, filling the water, Dawn was never sure, and at the time, he was even less sure that they'd make it much beyond that point, either. Coming out of the harbor and the breakwaters beyond, they'd already passed the bloated, rotting, acid-burned carcasses of enormous mososaurs and slightly smaller sharks, putrefying shoals of dead fish, heaving mats of broken kelp, and countless other dead creatures, all intermingled with a few struggling, dying marine animals who wouldn't be long in joining their brethren and neighbors in the vast, abyssal grave of the sea.*

*At one point, in the sudden glare of multiple, jagged bolts of lightning which, for a moment, lit up the sea around them like noon, he thought he saw one of the now extremely rare ichthyosaurs, great fish-like reptiles that had somehow managed to hang on through the last Great Extinction for some ninety million years all the way to Dawn's time. Slowly plowing through the heaving sea on a heading opposite to his, it radiated an almost palpable aura of sickness and pain as it passed his little launch, no more than fifty feet away. How had it survived the holocaust that had destroyed so many of its neighbors? Dawn marveled. Had it, perhaps, found shelter somewhere in one of those natural harbors in the volcanic islands around here that had been created when part of the caldera of the volcano that had built the island fell in, only coming out now, looking for the Gods alone knew what?*

*– Something huge passed them about then, for the launch rolled and bucked in its wake, and he was afraid for a moment that they'd be swamped and capsized. But the faithful little launch's superb gyroscopes, workhorse computers, and tireless engines kept them upright and on their original heading with little strain, and soon whatever it was, was far out of sight behind them.*

*But there was more to come, much more – and much worse. For one thing, the rain and sleet that still pelted down outside was caustic, filled with fumes of nitric acid, sulfuric acid, and countless other chemicals which could eventually do serious damage to the launch's hull. When they'd pulled out of the barn, heading for the open sea, that hull was in pristine condition. Made of titanium steel, it was overlain with a bonded ceramic that could have taken anything short of a nuke and laughed at it. But within 24 hours after leaving the harbor the hull's smooth finish was already micropitted everywhere, and the tempered glass in the launch's ports and the big windows on the navigator's cabin was streaked and notched from corrosion and the occasional impact by debris still falling from time to time from the charcoal skies above.*

*But there was nothing for it now but to keep going. The island they'd just left offered little in the way of safe haven, let alone anything worth living for. If there was anything left in the world for Dawn, it lay ahead, in North Sandstone, where his family was . . . or had been.*

*He was never sure just how long it took to make that crossing, thousands of miles of storm-wracked seas like nothing he'd ever seen before, dead and dying animals floating in it everywhere he looked, the Hell-Gods' own holocaust of everything from sea-urchins, clams, and kelp to mososaurs, plesiosaurs, and all their kin, all of them now only huge globs of charred meat and vegetables floating in a vast acidic soup. To be sure, there was a state-of-the-art military chronometer aboard the launch. But for some reason, unlike the shipboard computers and the electronics that regulated the launch's motor, the chronometer's delicate electronics were completely unshielded, and it was likely that the enormous EMPs generated by the impacts that had torn Dawn's world apart had bollixed its guts. So he couldn't be sure exactly how much time had passed since they'd left the harbor.*

*Fortunately the galley's refrigerator, stove, and other equipment didn't depend upon electronics at all, and of course the toilet in the little head didn't either. It had been standard practice for decades to avoid the use of electronics in everything possible, in order to avoid the sort of dependence upon them*

*that could kill civilization in the event of a huge coronal mass ejection aimed directly at the Earth – or the EMPs of nuclear war. Thus common household appliances, most engines and motors, and almost all the other simple mechanical mules of civilization could go right on working through everything but direct attack on their physical integrity. And when it was not possible to avoid the use of electronics in mission-critical systems and their civilian counterparts, such as computers, sophisticated internal shielding was used to limit the damage in such event as much as possible. So the equipment upon which both their lives now depended, from the galley equipment to the tireless motor in the hold below, continued to work perfectly.*

*Occasionally there were times when Dawn had to stand a sleepless, frantic, uninterrupted watch at the wheel of one or two days, trying to keep the boat upright and on its heading in the worst of the monster storms the Event had set loose across the world's oceans, helplessly pissing into his boots because he dared not leave the wheel to use the head while wash from the tossing waters outside repeatedly cleansed the floor of his voided urine,<sup>28</sup> Yip chattering in terror from whatever bolt-hole near the ceiling the little rat-weasel had taken refuge in. But save for such mercifully rare intervals, the boat's computers and gyroscope were more than up to the task of steering on autopilot, and there really wasn't much to do to fill the time but sleep, eat, and otherwise take care of life's basic necessities. Barring accident, the launch's inertial guidance system would take them without a hitch through the Tethyan Seaway, then straight on across the Atlantic to Dawn's family's home on the coast of North Sandstone . . . if there were any still alive there, Dawn silently amended, breathing a prayer to the Lady of Battles that at least some members of his family had survived, and that he could rescue them.*

*Dawn and Yip were now both still recovering from their injuries, and needed all the good food and rest they could get. To be sure, if something unforeseen came up, Dawn would be needed at the helm to take charge and make the decisions of which the launch's computers were incapable; but in that event, in order to alert him the computers would set off a klaxon loud enough to wake the dead, let alone a sleeping man. Unless whatever unforeseen contingency was so catastrophic that it would have killed them outright anyway, he'd be up and around in plenty of time to do whatever needed doing.*

*So for long, black days the two of them, Dawn and Yip, ate and slept, and ate and napped, and ate and dozed some more, and in between did what they could to get themselves back in shape, at least enough to deal with whatever they might find when they finally made land. The sight in Dawn's injured eye seemed to be coming back, and his burns and cuts, even the worst of them, were healing, thanks to that magnificent military first-aid kit and his own strong constitution.*

*As for Yip, most of his burns were healing even more rapidly than Dawn's, and within a week or so he had filled out so well that it would have been hard to recognize him from the starveling creature he'd been when Dawn had first discovered him in the galley. His injured right arm would never regrow his lost hand, of course, but it had finally stopped oozing blood and lymph, and the stump was healing over with clean scar tissue; watching Yip run about the boat, jumping up on things, investigating every inch of the vessel, you'd swear he still had both hands. More than anything else, even the good food and the various potions and ointments from the first-aid kit, it was the comfort and companionship that Yip got from Dawn that seemed to be doing him the most good. Every night, Yip slept curled up next to Dawn when the man took to his bunk; and when, after eating a meal or taking exercise, sitting in a lounge chair in the navigator's cabin, Dawn read from some of the books the launch's last crew had left behind, travelogues or suspense novels or even some high-class pornography, Yip would curl up in his lap, and Dawn would stroke Yip's fur and scratch his ears with one hand while holding his book in the other, and Yip would soon be making the purring and squeaking noises that signified blessed-out happiness among his kind.*

*Dawn knew that the little mammal liked him and regarded him as a protector and a source of food. But it wasn't until the night that a great predatory bird landed on the launch, directly before the navigator's cabin's big front windows, and tried to break into the cabin, that Dawn learned the depth of the little mammal's affection for him.*

*The bird, which looked like a vulture crossed with a great predatory avian raptor, an ugly thing with a huge hooked beak, a scrawny neck whose purplish-red wattles looked like cancerous growths, great sulfurous eyes that seemed to be looking straight out of the Pit, draggled dirt-brown and soot-black feathers, and enormous, hooked talons like billhooks, stared through the window, focusing its evil gaze on Dawn. Opening that wicked beak, it uttered a harsh, hungry cry so loud and penetrating they could*

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hear it even above the noise of the storm. How it had survived the Event was a mystery – perhaps, just as the Lady of Battles took care of Her own, the Lords and Ladies of Hell took care of Their own, too, for this bird looked as if it had just come straight out of the deepest and nastiest parts of Hell. But Dawn wasn't worried. The tempered-glass windows, though pitted and scored from the acid rain and falling debris after all this time at sea, would easily have stopped bullets, let alone a mere bird.

– Suddenly, one of the two forward windows sagged inward in its frame, then dropped down to the floorboards at Dawn's feet – the putty and grout that had been used to secure it in its mounting had finally given way under the continuous onslaught of acid rain and battering from huge waves and black hail and sleet!

And then he was face to face with the damned thing, and it was raising its wings and opening its beak, leaning forward to grapple with him – but suddenly the bird seemed to have grown a furry nose above its hard beak, and was screaming in agony as razor-sharp little claws dug at its right eye, while teeth just as sharp clamped hard on the flesh above its beak. Yip had thrown himself at the bird and was doing his all-out best to kill the thing that had dared to threaten Dawn! Dawn wasted no time in exploiting the opportunity that Yip's bravery had made for him – with his own heavy-nailed, good left hand, he grabbed the bird's neck just behind its head, and, with one terrible twisting, crushing move, he broke its neck before it had a chance to hurt the gallant little mammal that had flung himself on it in his frenzied rage at the thing that had dared to try to hurt his friend.

And then there were just the two of them, the man and the mammal, in that rain-drenched, freezing-cold cabin, panting hard, staring down at the broken-necked carcass of the huge bird that lay on the floor below the banks of instruments Dawn used to pilot the boat whenever he took it off the inertial guidance system. Yip, crouched over the carcass, was the first to catch his breath. Pulling a deep draft of air into his lungs, he let loose a series of blood-freezing, shrieking battle-cries at the bird. Then he began worrying the carcass with his sharp little teeth, tearing chunks of flesh and handfuls of feathers off it and strewing them all over the floor in the process.

“Hey, hey, little warrior, you don't have to do that any more, the bastard's dead!” Dawn told Yip softly, bending down to gently pry Yip loose from his dead enemy. Picking up the little mammal, Dawn lifted him up so they could look eye-to-eye at each other. “It's all right, Yip, it's all right,” he told the angry mammal. “It's dead. You killed it.”

“Chee?” Yip asked him doubtfully. The crisis past, he looked dreadfully tired and washed out, though fortunately Dawn had acted so quickly that there hadn't been time for the bird to do any harm to Yip.

“Yep. It's dead. You killed it.”

“Chee!!!”

“That's right, little warrior,” Dawn told him, laughing admiringly. “You've got all the guts in the world, you know that?”

Stretching forward on his hind legs, bracing himself on Dawn's shoulder with his one good paw, Yip rained frantic kisses on his big friend, all the while making little churring and whimpering sounds, the sort of noises that a female of Yip's species made when, after rescuing one of her babies from danger, she'd utter as she made sure her baby was all right, and did what she could to comfort the frightened infant.

“Hey, hey!” Dawn told him, laughing. “I'm fine, I'm fine! – Tell you what, let's get this cabin cleaned up and put that window back in place and then I'll make some of that hash you like so well, okay?”

“Chee!”

Still laughing, Dawn carefully deposited Yip in one pocket of his sweater – the Navy-issue type sweaters in the launch's lockers all had big pockets all over so that seamen could use them as tool-kits when working in bad weather on something demanding the use of lots of tools – then turned to the task of dealing with the dead bird's carcass as well as cleaning up the cabin and making it weather-secure once more.

What to do with the bird wasn't a problem. A predator and carrion eater, its flesh was rank and nasty, and there was nothing else of value on it, either. So Dawn simply threw it back out the window, where, sliding down the hull, it fell into the sea.

Cleaning up the cabin was going to be a bitch, though, and trying to do so with that window out would be even worse. So Dawn decided to repair the window first. Once the cabin wasn't shipping any more spray, rain, or sleet, it would be a great deal easier to clean up, especially because then he could use the heaters to good effect and dry the cabin out that much more quickly.

*Finding grout and putty in the tool and equipment lockers, he set to work. After a great deal of effort attended by a lot of expert and highly fluent cursing – closely watched the whole time by Yip, who, head cocked to capture every word, was clearly taking notes for future reference – he finally had the window back in place. In addition to his stints at carpentry, he'd done plenty of home repairs in his time, not to mention what he'd learned in the Marines about keeping the barracks in good shape and everything in it in good repair, and by the time he had finished the job, that window was unlikely to come out again short of the end of the world – and maybe not even then. Finally satisfied that the cabin was once more watertight, he set about cleaning it up. That took even more time – if he wasn't extremely careful to wipe down all the instruments and metal surfaces and make sure he got all the moisture off them, corrosion could quickly ruin something crucial to the launch's shipworthiness and spell disaster for them, stranding them far out at sea or leaving them helpless in the face of monster waves or, the Gods help them, a mososaur attack, assuming any of the poor bastard beasts had managed to survive the holocaust that had just been visited on the world.*

*Finally, hours later, when Dawn was exhausted and aching in every joint, the cabin was completely dry once more, except for a few damp spots on the floor, which would soon be taken care of by the heaters Dawn had running full blast to get the temperature in the launch back up to something bearable. All during the time Dawn spent cleaning up the cabin, Yip had rested contentedly in his pocket, occasionally making little churring or purring noises, not trying to climb out or making any fuss.*

*Falling exhausted into a deck chair, taking the little mammal out of his pocket and holding him in his hand at about chest height, Dawn told Yip, "I'm all beat to hell, friend, but food sounds good about now, and so would a shot of whiskey. Want some food?"*

*"Yeek!" Yip affirmed.*

*"Okay, I'll make that hash I promised you, and some veggies to go with it from some of those cans in the cupboards, and we'll have a nice supper. Want to go use your potty before dinner?"*

*Yip's potty was a cardboard box Dawn had found in a corner of the galley, filled with strips of paper torn from some old newspapers that had been sitting on a shelf in the navigator's cabin, and placed in the launch's head, next to the toilet. Squeaking again to indicate he sure could go for that, Yip turned a circle in the palm of Dawn's hand.*

*"Okay, okay, fella," Dawn told him, laughing, as he carried the mammal toward the head. "'Here, let's take you into the head, and then, when you're done, you come join me in the galley, okay?"*

*Not too much later, both were sitting down to a hot, filling meal of hash and legumes, Dawn sitting on the bench at the galley's table, and Yip up on the table-top, eating from his own little dish and drinking from a pan of water Dawn had set out for him. After dinner, as he said he'd do, Dawn got out a bottle of Triceratops Mountain whiskey, some of the best whiskey in the world, made only in central Eurasia, in the great grain-belt of the world. Apparently somebody in the Navy had had very good taste in liquor. Raising his glass in a toast to his absent benefactor, Dawn slugged down a good ounce of it. Then, coughing and spluttering as the fire in his throat gradually migrated south to become a sustaining warmth in his belly, Dawn said, "Well, here's to you, whoever you are – were. May the Gods make you a home in the Gardens of the Blessed, may you incarnate again as a wealthy man with loving wives and co-husbands and numerous devoted children, and may your descendants number as the stars in the heavens!" – a standard toast to the beloved dead among Dawn's people. In the meantime, Yip snuggled down in Dawn's lap and went to sleep there, utterly content.*

*Finally Dawn staggered off to bed, carrying Yip with him, and the two of them fell into a heavy sleep, which for Dawn was filled with ominous dreams about the horrors he'd likely find when they finally reached their destination.*

*He came awake to find Yip anxiously kissing his snout and making "Yik-yik!" noises. "Hunh? Whuzzup?"*

*"Yik!"*

*"Okay, okay, I'm getting up . . . Now, what the devil is it, Yip?" he asked the mammal grumpily. For answer, Yip leaped off the bed and ran to the cabin's door, where, turning to face Dawn, he began to chatter excitedly.*

*Then Dawn realized what that noise he'd been half-consciously aware of even in his dreams had to be: the klaxon! "Oh, shit! What the hell's gone wrong now?" he muttered, struggling into his clothes and*

*heading for the navigator's cabin, Yip bouncing about in circles all around him, chattering a blue streak all the while.*

*Instead of the disaster he'd feared would greet him, he was stunned to find that for the first time in more days than he'd been able to keep track of, sunlight was pouring down on them through a great rift in the clouds covering the western horizon. It was close to sunset, and the borders of the clouds surrounding the sky-gap were dyed brilliant orange, vivid crimson, and molten gold by sunlight, while the patch of sky peeking through that gap was an intense blue the color of the great dome above the dinner-hall of the Gods Themselves. Perhaps those glorious sunset colors were a legacy of the last remnants of Event-caused smog still lingering in the atmosphere.*

*Nor was that all: dead ahead of them was land!*

## **Chapter 5: Landfall**

*"Oh, Gods, have we actually come safely all that way?" he marveled. "Yip, that's land ahead of us!"*

*Hoping against hope that somehow his innate sense of time had failed him completely and that they had covered the thousands of miles between Hunter's Paradise and North Sandstone, as the launch drew closer and closer to the dark mass against the gray-shrouded horizon, he looked for signs of home.*

*But then he finally saw it clear, and his face fell – it was only an island, the first of many along their route northwest. It had to be one of the islands whose coordinates he'd programmed into the boat's computers, where the Navy had set up a supply depot and ammunition dump. Dispiritedly checking his computer-generated charts and the map coordinates of the island which the computer produced for him with the touch of a key, he found that it was Oret's Dream, named after the Lord of the Sea and His dominion over the realms of sleep and dream, a tourist magnet that was also strategically valuable because of its placement in the Tethys, not far from the Ocean-of-the-Sunrise and close by the northern half of Eastern Gond.*

*Dawn's mood lightened somewhat again as he realized that, assuming that not everything on the island had been destroyed in the aftermath of the Event, there could well be spare parts for the launch there, maybe some way to repair the hull's finish, stores of medicines and food – all sorts of things they'd need to make it to the mainland safely and have a chance of survival once they got there.*

*Fortunately, though it was nearly nightfall, they still had light to see where they were going. The shoreline of the island, an ancient, extinct volcano into which a town and military base had been built, had numerous treacherous shoals and "false harbors," inlets with sheer, unscalable walls, no good for his purposes. According to the maps programmed into the launch's computers, there should be a good, sizable harbor almost dead ahead of him, entered by a gaping hole in the wall of the caldera which, opening to the southeast, had conveniently fallen in for natural reasons millennia ago. But that harbor was flanked on one side by dangerous shoals and rocks like gigantic fangs lining its shores, and on the other by one of those useless inlets with extremely treacherous cross-currents, which could only have been exacerbated by heaving seas, products of the storms left in the Event's wake. And come the night, safe passage through that terrible strait would be virtually impossible.*

*So he decided to take advantage of the waning light and make harbor, if at all possible, before the Sun's blessed light was gone. Quickly shifting the launch's controls over to manual, making ready to turn on the huge halogen lights on the roof of the navigator's cabin if they weren't well into the harbor by nightfall, he headed the launch directly toward what he hoped and prayed was the harbor, keeping one eye on the indicator that told him how far off the heading given by the computer for his desired position he was, and working to minimize that distance at all times.*

*As it turned out, he didn't have to turn on the halogens until the launch was actually nosing its way into the waterway leading into the island's main harbor. Up until that point it was almost frighteningly easy – but then it got nasty.*

*Once that waterway had been wide and deep, wide enough and then some for four-lane traffic, including everything from pleasure boats to destroyers and even larger ships. But though, because of their sheltered niche within the volcano's caldera, the town, its harbor, and the waterway had been spared the tremendous, miles-high tsunamis that had scoured the world's shorelines in the wake of the Event, they had borne the full brunt of incandescent debris raining down from the heavens, 7.8-9.0*

earthquakes, and all the rest of the Event's catastrophic spin-offs. The jetty's tossing waters were filled with ominous mountains of debris that included everything from the putrescent corpses of plesiosaurs, rotting masses of dead fish, and the occasional half-dead ammonoid to the corpses of both civilians and naval personnel, their pets, and wildlife of the local biological preserve, all intermixed with the smashed and battered remains of both civilian and military craft. Looking out unhappily at the masses of detritus, jumbled junk, and rotting carcasses sloshing back and forth in the jetty's uneasy waters, Dawn wasn't sure he'd be able to make it all the way into the harbor itself. Indeed, they had a few close calls as they slowly, so slowly inched their way along the jetty through narrow lanes that fortuitously opened up and then closed once more among the heaped-up, rotting remains of a dead world. Almost running aground in one place, nearly crushed by a falling boom off a derelict, half-wrecked naval cruiser they passed in another, often they had to push their way between heaps of unidentifiable or all-too identifiable things to reach open water again. Even with everything in the launch sealed up tight, the stench of rot and decay and the staggering ammoniac fumes rolling off long-dead corpses permeated the navigator's cabin, their overwhelming intensity making both Dawn and Yip retch, interfering so much with Dawn's ability to navigate his way through the treacherous channels in the jetty that at times he came very close to wrecking the launch.

But somehow, maybe thanks to Dawn's guardian good angel or, perhaps, the fact that even Lord Isffuifap Himself, the God of everything that goes **OWNGR** in life, has His off-days, they finally made it safely into the harbor itself. There, though wrecked ships and boats were everywhere and storm-wrack had done its best to fill in the gaps between, they found it easier going. The water in the harbor was far calmer than even that in the jetty, due in great part to the fact that the jetty, rather than going straight out from the harbor into the sea, curved clear around its outer wall before connecting with the ocean. Even so, it took them the best part of two hours to finally find a place to tie up, a vast concrete dry-dock which also had inlets for temporary residents such as tugs and gigs. And for a miracle, the dry-dock was completely empty, not one ship or boat remaining in it.

Even better, the dry-dock was roofed over with great concrete slabs, forming a sort of artificial cavern. It hadn't been damaged by the aftermath of the Event, though its roof was heavily littered with debris of all kinds. Its great concrete front doors had kept most of the falling debris out of it – and not only were they unlocked, but also, thanks to their beautifully engineered design, they could be opened manually without much effort. Temporarily mooring the launch at one of the great piers by the dry-dock, Dawn debarked from it and, going over to the dry-dock to see whether he could get the launch into it, managed to get its doors all the way open. Then, returning to the launch, he carefully piloted it into one of the slips along the sides of the dry-dock, the sort that had been reserved for the tugs that shepherded their great charges, the cruisers, destroyers, and liners coming into the harbor for repairs.

Then, cutting the halogens and the running lights he'd put on, just in case, Dawn turned off the launch's motor. Heaving a great sigh of relief, slumping down in his seat as the strain of the last few hours finally overcame his steely determination to keep going, Dawn told Yip, the words coming out in a near-croak, "Hey, little warrior, we made it!"

"Yeek!" cheered Yip.

"Tell you what, Yip, let's get you some dinner, and I'll make myself a sandwich and maybe knock back some of that Triceratops Mountain, and we can take a well-deserved rest. What do you say?"

"Yeek!"

"Sounds good to me, too. Okay, let's do that thing."

A little later, after the man and the little mammal had eaten and Dawn had celebrated their safe arrival on the island with a couple of shots of good whiskey, without more ado the two of them crawled into Dawn's bunk and promptly fell asleep.

When they awoke, it wasn't quite as dark as it had been during all those long, cold days since the Event. The omnipresent cloud-wrack had thinned out some, the sky was an oddly luminescent silver-gray rather than pitch-black, and there was even a glimmer of sunlight through a sudden rift in the clouds. The clock, which supposedly automatically adjusted its time to the longitude given to it by the computers, swore and bedamned it was now high noon. They'd slept more than a half a day. "Well, well, Yip, maybe the damned thing does work, after all," Dawn told his furry friend, chuckling a little. "I've heard it said the

Sun is always visible around noon, if only for a few moments, no matter how overcast or stormy it is, so it's probably noon.

“– Hmm . . . come to think of it, if the clock takes its longitude off the computers, it probably resets the time to whatever the computers have, too,” he mused. “So it doesn't matter if the EMPs from the impacts scrambled it up some . . . I think.

“Okay, that means we've got a dependable clock. So, at least at noon, I can take sightings and get a look around . . . if things are beginning to clear up, anyway.

“Now to see if this poor little boat is in good enough shape to get us the rest of the way home . . .”

*Providentially, the dry-dock's own big overhead halogens were still working – its enormous hydrogen-cell batteries, housed safely within their own concrete containment, still held plenty of power. By the light of the dry-dock's halogens, which ran off the almost inexhaustible hydrogen-cells that provided power for most of the town, Dawn started inspecting his battered launch, to see how much damage it had taken during its voyage here, and whether it could be repaired.*

*He was overjoyed to find that while the finish on the launch's hull had been pitted and scarred by falling debris and acid rain, the pitting was shallow, and the few serious dings in it stopped at the second layer of finish, which was made of a far tougher material than the first one. Apparently the makers of the launch had anticipated accidental or intentional impacts or other insults to the hull that could get through the ceramic finish's first layer, and had provided for that with much tougher and stronger materials for its inner second and third layers, which like the materials composing the outer first layer, were spin-offs from the world's various space-programs. How odd it was that something designed to shield craft moving through the near-vacuum of interplanetary space from atmospheric friction during take-off and re-entry could also be used to protect the hulls of boats and ships designed for the use on the world's oceans from the slings and arrows of kinetic energy and corrosion! Fortuitously, the ceramics used in the finish also added very little to the overall weight of the boat, and in fact had enabled its makers to use thinner paneling for the steel hull, so that in the end the launch ran significantly lighter than it would have if they had not put on those protective liners.*

*Indeed, Dawn was far more concerned with the structural integrity of the navigator's cabin and other areas of the ship where there were windows and ports. Since that window had popped out in the navigator's cabin during the attack by that enormous bird, he'd worried that others might come loose. He'd only been able to make a cursory inspection of the portholes and other vulnerable parts of the boat while they were still at sea. Now he gave the launch a complete going-over, to find any that were about to fail and repair them as best he could before they set out to sea once more.*

*The portholes and fittings, which were all set in heavy bronze-and-steel collars, were all in top condition, save for one fitting which, he discovered, had a crack running all the way across it. Located in the outer wall of the hold, it was well below the waterline, and it wouldn't have been too much longer before it had failed catastrophically if he hadn't made port by now. He'd have to run the launch up into the dry-dock to fix it, a task that could take several days.*

*Well, he likely had all the time in the world, he reflected sadly. What were the odds that anyone or anything still waited for him in North Sandstone? Why not take his time and do the job right? At the very least, Yip, whom Dawn by now considered to be a gift and a message from the Gods Themselves, depended upon him. He had to do right by the little mammal – and getting them both drowned at sea because of a fitting he hadn't bothered to do a proper job on definitely wouldn't fill the bill. So, opening the flood-gates to get the ramps up to the dry-well below water, he piloted the boat up one of the ramps, over the sill, and into the dry-well beyond. Then, manually operating the installation's pumps, he emptied the water out of the dry-well, leaving the launch, held up on either side by a long series of stanchions, completely exposed all the way to its keel. After a 24-hour wait to let the launch's exterior get as dry as possible, he began work on the damaged fitting, pulling off the collar that held it in on the outside, exposing the leaking fitting so he could pull it out and replace it with whatever he could find that would at least make that part of the hull water-tight.*

*As it happened, the fitting was of a standard size and shape, and there was a storeroom in the installation that held plenty of replacement parts for it. There were also collars that would fit it, too, and he decided to replace the ones that were already in place for that fitting with brand-new ones – the old ones looked slightly corroded, had maybe been that way for some time before he commandeered the launch, and he didn't trust them.*



*None of the other fittings or portholes seemed to have problems, so he went after the windows in the navigator's cabin next, not only the big ones in front but those at the sides and in the back. The latter hadn't taken quite as much battering as the front windows had, but like those in front they had their share of pitting from corrosion due to acid rain, and as a result none of them gave as clear a view as he wanted. Further, in every case their securements in their frames were of dubious quality; the constant battering by waves as well as the acid rain had done a far worse job on the grout and putty holding them in their frames, not to mention the frames themselves, than they had on the glass of the window-panes. So that was his next task, replacing not only all the launch's windows but also their frames, as well, making sure that whatever he used to set them into those frames would be up to the task of withstanding the elements and keeping those windows where they belonged over thousands of miles through angry seas and freezing black rain, snow, and hail reeking of brimstone and metal-devouring acidic ions.*

*Between bouts of work on the launch, which also included cleaning its hull of barnacles and other things that could eventually work their way through even the toughest hull, no matter what it was made of, cleaning and airing out the cabins, and similar tasks, Dawn explored Ororet's Dream. Not only did he want to see what resources he could find on the island to take with them on their way home, but he also wanted to learn how much damage the island had sustained, and whether, by some long chance, anyone was still alive there. From taped and written logs he found in the main office of the dry-dock, he learned that the island's residents had received advance warning of what to expect in the wake of the Event. The storm-fronts racing out from the impact sites, the acid rain, and the other fallout from the Event hadn't hit this island for a good eighteen hours after the biggest impact, the one that had targeted the open sea between North and South America, and its placement in the open Atlantic had spared it the worst of the firefalls from the continental impacts.. During that time, thanks to radio and comsat warnings that had come right after the first impacts on North Sandstone, anyone on the island who had the means headed out to sea as fast as possible. Fortuitously, thanks to international tensions during the weeks just prior to the Event, the Navy was already on a standby condition. So within five hours or so all Navy personnel who weren't already aboard one ship or another, together with their dependents and whatever luggage and personal possessions they had been able to grab at the last minute, had been herded aboard whatever remaining vessels could accommodate them, which then made ready to stand out to sea.*

*However, the oncoming storm-fronts, arriving a good deal sooner than anyone had been prepared for, caught a great number of those ships and boats still in the harbor. That accounted for a large proportion of the flotsam in the harbor, the jetty, and the area around the entrance of the latter into sea. There were also wrecked pleasure-craft and commercial fishing boats carrying numerous non-military personnel that had likewise tried to get off the island as quickly as possible. Judging from a few despairing notes written at the end of the last entry in the General Manager's logs, though, they hadn't fared any worse than those who had actually made it successfully into the open ocean. As frantic radio messages from the ships and other craft that had been able to make it out of the harbor attested, between torrents of white-hot fallout from the impacts, sulfurous acid rain, hammering storms, and the antics of panicked plesiosaurs and terrified mososaurs trying to escape the incendiary rains that kept them from being able to surface long enough to pull the air they desperately needed into their parched lungs, all craft that had actually made it out to sea, from tiny pleasure-boats to the NSSS Fist-of-God, the enormous nuclear aircraft carrier, pride of the Navy, that had also been stationed at the island prior to the Event, found it no better a haven than the island they had just left would have been. A great deal of the sea-junk and mangled, burned, rotting corpses that had cluttered the sea as Dawn's launch approached this island must have been the remains of those craft and their hapless passengers.*

*Yet there could still be somebody left alive here on Ororet's Dream, just as he had managed to survive on Hunter's Island when the Event took place. There might also be domesticated animals here, pets left behind by people fleeing the island, or wild animals that had somehow managed to survive in caves or other havens. If nothing else, he might be able to find a companion for Yip, who would likely benefit from the company of a female or two of his own kind.*

*So when Dawn wasn't hard at work on the launch, making sure it was seaworthy and in shipshape condition for the remainder of the long voyage home, taking Yip with him, Dawn began exploring the island.*

*What they found wasn't at all reassuring. From the burned-out, gutted shells of homes, businesses, military buildings, schools, theaters, chapels, temples, and auditoria, to the charred remains of vehicles,*

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*playground equipment, parklands, animal pens, and the other hallmarks of civilization, the island was one vast junkyard, and empty of all life save insects, other invertebrates, and a few patches of grass here and there. Almost no intact structures or artifacts remained on Ororet's Dream. A few buildings stood essentially undamaged, along with whatever they had contained when the Event took place, but they were few and far between. In every case, like the dry-dock installation, these survivors were made of concrete, and had either had their doors closed against the rains of burning debris and the horrifying storms that followed with their icy, driving rain and sleet, or been open on one side to the water, which put out any fires that might have been started by the blasting fire-falls that had followed on the heels of the Event. In one such, he found the body of a lone man, its decay retarded by the appallingly cold weather, who had evidently died as the result of a long, ragged knife-wound across his chest and belly. There he lay, spread-eagled, having fallen backward onto the building's bare pine floor, open eyes staring up into the dark recesses of the ceiling far above as if searching there for answers to the question, "Why me, Gods?" One of the man's outflung hands still clutched the handle of a briefcase which, Dawn found when he opened it, contained a prince's ransom in precious stones and silver bullion. Near the corpse's other hand lay an automatic pistol which, on inspection, proved to have been fired twice, two of the twelve chambers of its magazine being empty. The building, which looked to have been a warehouse, had no other occupants, dead or alive, save, here and there, for a few sad little husks of frozen spiders in their ice-rimed webs in the corners. There wasn't a sign of anything else, not even the tiny, vicious little wild colonial mammals known as Tunnel-Gnawers, which had once infested virtually every building the world over. Burrowing their way into supposedly pest-proof food-storage areas, Tunnel-Gnawers ate half of everything stored there, then defecated on the rest. Sometimes they crawled into bedrooms and thence into cribs holding babies, which they then attacked and tried to eat. They had proved impervious to just about every pesticide and trap ever devised – but there was no evidence of them here. Beyond that nasty chest-wound, the body Dawn found there was untouched by vermin or anything else. The blood that had issued from the wound was now just a frozen magenta slime on the floor around the body . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

"They had guns? Automatics?"

"Apparently, Hannah," Paul told me, resting his chin on top of my head as he continued his story. "They had a real civilization, one at least as advanced as ours was before the War, with bases in space and a colony on Mars and expeditions heading farther and farther out into the Solar System. It makes you want to weep, thinking about it – they got so close, didn't they? A few more decades and they might have made it to the stars. Instead . . . well, they got caught with their pants down. Their astronomers had warned them about the possibility of world-wrecking cometary or asteroid impacts like the ones that they thought – and our scientists now think – might have ended the geological era before theirs, which we call the Paleozoic. And, in fact, they were thinking of doing something about it, maybe putting up a whole bunch of automated satellites in orbit between Earth and Mars as well as between Earth and Venus to watch for Earth-crossers, space-junk in orbits that might someday intersect the Earth's, to try to give enough advance warning to do something about them before it was too late. But like so many of our governments, theirs hemmed and hawed for a while, then finally decided to put the money needed for something like that into various pork-barrel projects, and . . . well, you know what happened.

"Of course, it might not have been entirely a nasty cosmic accident, a horrible thing to happen to a planet, but without any malice behind it. Sneaky Rat had had a security clearance in his time, and old habits died hard. There were things he somehow kept hidden from me, things I couldn't access – but hints got through, hints of something much darker."

"Don't tell me – aliens?"

"You mean ETs? Not necessarily. Their world was divided up into big nation-states like ours was up until the War, with some of those nation-states in a permanent state of hostility toward the others. Not open warfare, you understand, more like the state of affairs up until the Two-Day War, with some really scary weapons waiting on both sides for the outbreak of hostilities to be used on the enemy, weapons that could've done a real number on the planet, just like our nukes almost did. In fact, they did have nukes, as well as nuclear power for both civilian and military uses – I know Sneaky Rat understood the basic principles of nuclear physics, even though it wasn't his specialty, which was something having to do with

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industrial chemistry, and they had had their own version of the Periodic Table of the Chemical Elements for over a hundred years. He knew a good deal about the metallurgy of the actinide series, so you can bet his people had plenty of experience with nuclear power for industry, and almost certainly for warfare. They were very sophisticated, more than enough to put men – their kind of men – into space and keep them alive and well for long periods of time. They had begun to mine the asteroid belt, and were even planning a permanent base on Mercury for both scientific and industrial purposes.

“I think that at least one of their nations had bases out there in the asteroid belt or beyond, Hannah. And maybe, for whatever reason, they decided to heave a few rocks at the Earth. Maybe they were just trying to wipe out an enemy nation, and sort of overdid it. Maybe they were religious fanatics who really did want the end of the world, for whatever reasons lunatics like that might have. Whatever the reasons might have been, I think that it was a, a people-made disaster, not a natural one.”

“Oh, my God!”

“Yeah, that’s kinda how I felt – and how Sneaky Rat seemed to feel about it, too, though as I said, he kept that part of his mind pretty much locked up. I think he was more than a little ashamed of his people, his species, for being able to do such things, to even think of doing such things. He had a deep reverence for the whole living world, part of his religion but also part of his basic nature, I think. The idea of anyone doing such a horrible thing to Mother Earth was – I’m not sure how to put it: evil beyond evil, something so vile, unspeakably obscene and a hideous sacrilege all at the same time, he not only didn’t have words for it, he didn’t even have coherent concepts for it. In his heart of hearts, he seemed to believe that whoever could have done such a thing must have been radically insane, or wholly possessed by evil spirits.

“Anyway, his people were very, very sophisticated. The main differences between them and us was that they had a metabolism more like a bird’s than ours, their cerebral hemispheres evolved from different parts of the old reptile brain than ours did, they had a small but evident snout or muzzle instead of a flat face, there were patches of down or feathers on their bodies where we have hair, they had a different number of teeth, with different proportions of incisors, molars, and carnassials, they were on the average significantly bigger-boned and taller than we are, and they had short, nonretractable claws instead of flat, blunt fingernails and toenails of our sort.

“Yet they really were like us in a lot of ways, too. They gave birth to live young. Though they fed their young with regurgitated food or, sometimes, an artificial substitute for it (which their doctors advised against if at all possible, because it didn’t contain the enzymes and other chemicals provided by the mother’s crop) instead of milk for their first few months or years of life, the processes of conception, gestation, and birth for them were virtually identical to ours. The males even had external sex-organs the way we do, balls and a dick, rather than having the whole business in a retractable pouch the way modern birds and reptiles do, and their women had completely separate openings for the vagina, the urethra, and the colon, rather than one all-purpose cloaca, like today’s birds. And because their skin really was skin, like ours except just a tad thicker, rather than a scaly hide, sex could be just as blissful for them as it is for us. They loved each other, Hannah, individuals did, and they married and raised families and had friends the same way we do – and the same way many birds do. It wouldn’t have taken long for you to forget that Sneaky Rat wasn’t a member of our species after you’d known him for a little while, Hannah, not if you could communicate well with him, especially if you’d shared minds with him the way I did. Like I said, he was a man, not all that different from me or Monty or Andy or Big Bill, with all the concerns and pleasures and hopes and fears a man is heir to.”

“From what you’re saying, he sounds as if he truly was a man, in the best sense of the word – courageous, resourceful, honorable, all the rest of it. So it still puzzles me that this all began by his raping you – rape is not, shall we say, the hallmark of a great-hearted man, which is what he sounds like.”

“Hannah, I think the reason it began that way had everything to do with me and very little, if anything, to do with him. Someday I’ll explain why that’s so – I’m not really ready to right now, but I promise you that someday I will. For now, let’s just say that that’s the way my own mind was set up to take anything radically new, requiring a real paradigm-shift on my part to understand and accept it, as a, a violation, I think is the word I want. I got into a situation where I had to encounter Sneaky Rat, had to experience him, and that was the only way I could comprehend the fact of having to do so, at least in the beginning. And as it went on, and I began to change because of what that experience was doing to me, the experience itself changed from a rape to love-making to . . . well, you’ll see as I go on with the story.”

“Okay, I’ll try to keep from interrupting you again.”

“Oh, don’t worry, love, it’s not a problem,” he said, kissing the top of my head again. “I don’t mind. Anyway, as I was saying about Sneaky Rat’s exploration of Ororet’s Dream, between stints of work on his launch, they found that the island was almost entirely a shambles, a charnel house full of roasted, frozen corpses, smashed and burned buildings, seared parklands and wilderness. It almost broke his heart, seeing what had happened to an island that had once, like Hawaii, been billed as one of the great resort areas of its time, the ‘Pleasure-Dome of the Tethyan Seaway,’ they might have called it – ignoring the fact, of course, that it was also home to some of the most fearsome military weapons of their time, things like ICBMs and even a few nuclear submarines carrying what had to be nuclear missiles.

“Under those still-dark skies, through which the Sun was still only occasionally able to shine for a little while each day or two, it must have looked like Cocytus, the ninth and bottommost Circle of Hell. Nothing moved anywhere, except for ashes and debris and dust chivvied along by the winds and the endless roll of the surf against the beaches and the slap of the wavelets against the broken pilings and capsized, burned boats in the harbor. It was still icy-cold, though with the Sun now emerging from time to time through rifts in the clouds, there were times when it was, if not warm, just barely tolerable for a man wearing a windbreaker, trousers, and boots. He found he didn’t have to bundle up to the ears all the time in order to keep from freezing when he was outdoors, as long as he wore a good, warm watch-cap with ear-flaps, to protect the sides of his head from the cold – they had small, tender ears, somewhat like ours, and the skin of their faces was as sensitive as ours. He did start letting the thick, downy feathers that served him for a beard start growing, though – he’d shaved regularly throughout the journey to the island out of a feeling that it was rituals like that which might be all that stood between him and the utter dejection and anomie of developing madness, but clearly, now that he was out and about in the open air much of the time, he needed his beard, so there was no reason to keep on shaving, at least for the present.”

“A beard?”

“Sure, why not? Males of our species don’t generally have that layer of subcutaneous fat on their bodies to keep them warm, the way females do, so a beard is a damned practical thing in cold climates. Not to mention the fact that it’s a sexual signaling mechanism, the way your breasts are – for various reasons, we generally don’t go around naked, and in most cultures men don’t wear pants tight enough to, er, make them squeak, so we use signals other than the genitals to let each other know where we stand in the war against the sexes,” he said, chuckling, rubbing his chin affectionately against the top of my head. “The reason for that, especially in the tropics, where clothes aren’t really all that necessary, may have to do with the fact that primate males tend to react with hostility to the sight of the exposed genitals of other primate males – that old ‘my dick is bigger than yours’ business, which really has much more to do with establishing social rank and the beginnings of the structure necessary to a group of primates to allow it to function well as a community than it does with defending territory or the like. As far as exposed female genitalia go, they can inspire a tendency to rape among men, and hostility among women – in the latter case, that does have to do with territoriality, women defending access to their mates against potential intruders in order to keep those intruders from bearing babies with their mate’s genes, children who could grow up to become deadly rivals of their own offspring.

“Well, Sneaky Rat’s people had had the same sort of problems and had solved them much the same way we did, evolutionarily speaking – and, of course, we’re speaking of cultural evolution as much as any other kind. They wore clothes, Hannah, and did so for all the reason we do – to protect them against the elements, for social reasons, all the rest of it, even when it came to undressing, that is, what people, especially females, don’t wear in order to attract attention on the beach and elsewhere.”

“I wonder what their women wore.”

“Oh, near as I could tell, about anything and everything, the way our women do, often dictated by fashion at least as much as necessity. Their clothes were put together a little differently than ours, they had to be, because their body-frame was generally bigger and more robust than ours, but a skirt is a skirt and trousers are trousers, just about everywhere. People in some of their cultures wore robes and things like Arabic women wear, chadors or whatever they’re called, and in other cultures garments like Indian saris were worn by both men and women, but that’s nothing with which we aren’t familiar.

“Anyway, Sneaky Rat started growing out his beard (which, like the growth covering his head, was formed of fine-stranded feathers rather than hair, like we have) so that he could be more comfortable outdoors. Carrying Yip in his pocket – it was just too cold for the little guy outside, otherwise – he roamed all over the island, looking for survivors and anything else that might have been spared in the aftermath of

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the Event. He did finally find some potential resources that were relatively intact and in good shape: a big concrete warehouse full of stocks of food, clothing, medicine, seed, tools, all sorts of things that might come in handy on the voyage west as well as after they reached their destination; something like a bomb-shelter underneath buildings in the island's business district which had preserved, among other things, a well-stocked private library of science-fiction novels, very much like the ones we read now, which he loved to read; a small chapel belonging to members of his own religion in the basement of a large commercial building which, also built of concrete and containing little but crates of precision machine parts, hadn't been damaged much by the fall of burning debris.

"Entering the chapel, he took an unburned candle from the boxes of such candles kept in the shelves under the altar, and lit it at the shrine dedicated to his own patron Goddess, the Lady of Battles. The Lady of Battles had aspects of both Kali and Athena, and also resembled our Archangel Mikhail. Her closest companion was a divine rat-weasel resembling Yip, Who was a God of Wisdom, the way Hanuman accompanies Kali and Hermes does Athena. Though the scourge of all demonkind and the enemies of her people, the Lady of Battles protected and cherished those who loved and worshipped Her and kept Her commandments.

"Kneeling down on the bench before the shrine, Snaky Rat prayed to his Goddess, a long, heartfelt prayer that he would find his loved ones safe at home – or, in the more likely event that he did not, that She would strengthen his courage and resolve, enabling him to carry on as She would wish him to until at last, as the Gods finally do all of us, She called him Home.

"It was his next discovery that almost broke his heart: a schoolroom, in what we'd call an elementary school, for children who were just beginning to learn their letters and numbers and the first beginnings of a formal education. I guess you could call it a kindergarten room – it was a lot like the room where I first attended school here in the Keep, when I was about five years old myself. Sneaky Rat found the room, with everything in it perfectly intact and in order, in a corner of a basement of a large three-story building that had probably housed an entire elementary school. The building, which had had sturdy concrete walls, had collapsed on top of the basement, shielding it from the rain of blazing debris from the Event and the storms that followed. It hadn't caught fire the way so much else on the island had – why that was so was anyone's guess, but the result was that that schoolroom was spared virtually everything that had destroyed the rest of Oret's Dream. Entering a gap in the rubble of the building that had protected the basement from the heavenly fires of the Event, he descended a nearby spiral staircase, discovering the little schoolroom at the bottom of the stairway.

"On the blackboard at the front of the room was the lesson for the day – they probably evacuated the island at short notice, right in the middle of a school-day. On the wall opposite the blackboard were pictures of all sorts of creatures, animals and plants and even a few big fungi, probably clipped from magazines, with a short phrase beneath each one to identify it: 'This is a Gingko, like your mommy uses in salad.' 'This is a Triceratops. Look at the man riding it!' 'This is a Tyrannosaurus. Isn't he big and powerful?' 'This is a Mososaur – look how he cuts through the waves!' 'This is a Rat-weasel – look at him frolic with his friends!' And so on – exactly the sort of thing you'd find in any of our kindergartens today.

"Against one of the other two walls were bookshelves holding all sorts of children's books, and racks and shelves holding paints, clay, other art tools and supplies, pens, paper, and other things typical of such classrooms. But it was on the opposite wall was the thing that almost made him fall apart in sudden grief: row after row of children's drawings, done in crayon or chalk or colored pencils, each with a small photo of the child that had made it affixed to its upper right corner.

"Seeing that, he had to sit down for a while on one of the benches the children had used, head in hands, weeping so hard he almost doubled over in the pain of it. They had tear-glands just like ours, Hannah, and when they cried, they did it the way we do, sobbing and sobbing, the tears running down their faces, their sinuses getting all clogged up. They really were like us in an awful lot of ways – and I think that must have come about through natural selection, convergent evolution that fitted them to become a truly global species, one that could eventually reach the stars, that would have if the Event hadn't totaled them.

"Sneaky Rat had dozens of grown children, all now in early middle age, and more grand- and great-grandchildren than he could easily remember. A lot of the kids whose photos were attached to those drawings looked so much like his own sons and daughters had at those ages, and their children and grandchildren had at the time he left for that fateful trip to Hunter's Paradise, that he very nearly couldn't

bear it, couldn't bear thinking of all his family and friends back home going the way these had on Ororet's Dream . . .

"He heard a rattling noise at his feet. Looking down, he found that Yip had crawled out of his pocket and, finding a toy down there at the base of the bench, one rather like that dreydl you made for Leah and me a few years ago, had begun worrying and shaking it like a bone. The toy contained little pebbles or something of the sort to make it rattle when shaken, and Yip was getting a great deal of satisfaction out of the noise it made as he shook it and shook it in his sharp little teeth.

"Though the toy reminded Sneaky Rat all too much of similar toys his own children had played with when they were small, somehow the sight of Yip worrying that toy as if it were a giant carnosaur he'd killed single-handedly, proudly prancing back and forth by Sneaky Rat's feet as if to say, 'See what I did, Daddy!', lifted his spirits and pulled his aching mind and heart away from the thought of how the children who had used this room day after day must have perished on that last, terrible day of their lives.

"'Whatcha got, Yip?' he asked the mammal. 'Killed a bigun, did you?'

"'Yeek!' the little guy told him proudly, letting the rattle drop in the process.

"'Okay, that's your prey, you killed it, you get to take it back to the boat with us, okay?'" he said, scooping up Yip and his new toy, and depositing them both in one of his pockets. 'I think we'd best be getting on back now, my lad – it's coming onto dinner time,' he told him. Then, thinking how happy Yip looked, playing with that rattle, he took one more look around the room to see if there might be anything else there that Yip might like, or which he could use.

"There were some stuffed toys on the top shelf of one of the bookcases, one of a sort of generic carnosaur, another of a plesiosaur, another of a mammal a little like Yip. Picking them up, he looked around for something to carry them in. Finally, in the cloakroom behind the wall that held the artwork and photos of the kids, he found it: a big backpack, hanging on one of the coat-hooks. Obviously way too big for a very young child, it had to've been the teacher's. Supported on the hips and nicely balanced, it was big enough to carry a large load. Putting the stuffed toys into it, Sneaky Rat looked around the cloakroom to see if there was anything else that might be useful there . . ."

## **Chapter 6: A Message From the Gods**

*In a corner of the cloakroom there was a little heap of clothing. Picking through it, Dawn found a tiny sky-blue jacket with yellow and white accents, about right for a very small child, an equally tiny fuzzy pink sweater that a little girl might have worn, and a small T-shirt, white with a picture of a Triceratops done in blue and purple on the front, and below the picture the legend, "Triceratops Park – Where the Fun Things Are!". Maybe Yip would like the garments for bedding. When he picked them up, he hit the jackpot: a copy of The Book of the Lady of Battles, the bible of his clan and, especially, his family, which had been lying on the floor under the little pile of clothing. It looked almost brand-new – it might have been a gift to one of the children from a parent or the teacher.*

*Shivers crawled up and down his spine as he stared down at the little book. Another message from the Gods? Picking it up, he tucked it into another pocket, hoisted the backpack onto his back, and, tears stinging his eyes again as he did so, took one last look at those brightly-colored pictures and the photos of their creators before exiting the room.*

*As Dawn left the building the same way he'd entered, through the opening in the rubble that gave on the stairwell going down to the schoolroom, he found the Sun had come out again, this time through a far bigger rift in the clouds than any that had appeared since the Event. It was early afternoon, and the blessed sunlight was warm on his face – another omen, it had to be! The Gods were definitely telling him something. He determined to wait quietly on events until They made Their Will known to him.*

*Other than a few battered insects, spiders, and a scorpion or two here and there, so far they'd found no living creatures on the island, though scattered everywhere there were corpses of mammals, larger archosaurian fauna, birds, amphibia, and countless other species of animal life. The mangled, twisted corpse of a giant pteranodon lay in the lee of a collapsed house, on a slope of shattered brick and tiling; next to it, broken-necked, lying in a posture of agony, was a small carnosaur which had apparently been making a try for the pteranodon when the red-hot hammer of heaven had descended upon them both. (Ororet's Dream was not a natural habitat for pteranodons, especially so large a one. The animal might*

*have been blown or chased there by the leading edge of the monstrous pressure-wave generated by one or another of the impacting bolides. The little carnosaur, seeing the big creature glide down nearby, looking for a refuge, must have eagerly leaped at the chance to tackle such big prey while the latter was at a disadvantage. And then the shockwave hit the island, and would-be predator and intended prey died together in an instant of incandescent horror.) On what had been a broad green lawn fronting one of the many pleasant homes of the island, the half-charred corpse of a small pet mammal, one of Yip's cousins, lay next to the outflung hand of the shattered body of a woman – in the last terrifying moments of their lives, she had reached out to her pet and it had strained to reach her, the love between them almost enough to hold death off until they could come together. Around the little rat-weasel's neck were the torn remains of a collar on which was a tag that said, "Peeby – if lost, call 4235-8336-92, ask for Eerowi."*

*Farther down the street, Dawn found the carcass of an enormous ceratopsian, of a type often used even in modern times for the heavy hauling needed on farms and the like but sometimes also made pets of. It was, wedged halfway into someone's garage, the small sports vehicle for which the garage was home having been crushed to splinters against the structure's inside back wall by the frantic animal's futile attempt to gain shelter there from the burning winds that were cooking it alive. A great hole torn in the steel fence enclosing a park across the street from the house where the animal had perished had almost certainly been made by it, who had very likely been one of the park's denizens, perhaps used by the keepers for drawing carts filled with food for the animals around, or maybe resident in the petting zoo, housed in an area just the other side of the park. The park itself was a nature preserve, and beyond the fence Dawn glimpsed the contorted carcasses of numerous animals, large and small, strewn about the desolate landscape – perhaps the saddest was the body of an enormous Tyrannosaur, the gorgeous bright yellow-green-ivory-and-black coloration of the living animal that could be seen between extensive deep burns rendered dull and muddy by death, clutching a tiny replica of itself to its chest in so tender a way that it was almost certain it was one of its own chicks, which it had vainly tried to shelter with its own huge body from the relentlessly approaching, white-hot scythe of Death.*

*Everywhere Dawn went on the island, he saw death, death, and more death, the carcasses of parkland animals, wildlife, and pets, and the corpses of men, women, and children. Other than Yip and himself, almost never did he see anything alive beyond a few insects and other arthropods and, once in a great while, a bird or weakly flapping pteranodon high up in the sky, heading for the peaks of the volcanic island's mountains. Thanks to the freezing cold rain, sleet, and snow that had besieged the world after the Event, the carcasses strewn everywhere across the land were still in surprisingly good shape, save for whatever damage they had received from the shockwave and terrible heat of the Event on that first day. But with the sky beginning to clear, and the fact that it was still late Summer here, not far north of the Equator, not yet Autumn, soon the stench of putrescent flesh would cover the island in a miasma so foul that that alone would force Dawn to take Yip and leave the island as quickly as possible. He made a mental note to speed up his work on their boat, get them away from here before many more days elapsed, and definitely before the normal stormy weather of early Autumn began, which would be made infinitely rougher by the lingering meteorological aftereffects of the Event.*

*As for the island's plant-life, that had suffered almost as terribly as the animals had. Everywhere he looked he could see the blasted, blighted, or completely charred remains of bushes, ornamental shrubs and trees, great conifers and graceful cycads that had lined the streets of the island's residential areas, and bedded flowers that had graced homes, businesses, hotels, and other buildings. Between the fires of heaven that had come right after the Event and the stygian rain and sleet that had followed, little was left of the island's plant-life; save for a few dismal, defoliated skeletons of trees, bushes, and low herbs, all that was left of it was soggy, half-frozen masses of char and rot.*

*But above all, it was what remained of the people who had lived and worked on Ororet's Dream that stabbed Dawn to the heart, almost completely destroying what was left of his nerve. Located in the midst of numerous marine trading routes, some of which were ages-old, the island was so strategically well-placed that it had naturally become home to a great naval base as well as a powerful mercantile city, and thus had become home to people from all over the empire into which Dawn's nation had ultimately grown. Everywhere he went, Dawn found the burned and shattered bodies of people of all ages, the ones who, for whatever reason, hadn't been able to evacuate to the ocean, or hadn't wanted to. Before the Event, many of those people avoided certain groups of others, and vice-versa, many red-stripe-on-green people hating and fearing the amber-spots-on-mauve people, the ultramarine-and-emerald-detailing-on-cobalt-blue-*

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*background people detesting the scarlet-and-maroon-on-deep-purple ones, and so on. But now they were all brothers and sisters in death, sometimes even held in one another's arms, as if seeking one last comforting embrace from their own kind before the Great Dark closed in, regardless of skin color or anything else . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“They were *bigots*?”

“Not universally, no – but they sure as hell had their preferences about who they wanted to be with and who they didn't, and some of those preferences had to do with such things as skin color, speech accents, religious backgrounds, and all the rest of the same weary old biases that have given us so much grief in our time.<sup>29</sup> Hannah, remember Monty telling us about the instinct to avoid crowding and reject the stranger as a way of minimizing the risk of contacting deadly epidemic diseases? Social insects do it, social spiders do it, terrestrial vertebrates of all kinds, from crows and ravens and starlings to mice and rats, do it – and so do we. Everybody has a thing about the Stranger, who is always suspect on sight, until he or she has become known to the community and has found some sort of place in it. This is normal, and in fact is healthy, because, like Monty said, it gives everyone a chance to see if the newcomer is odd or off in some way which might have to do with carrying some sort of epidemic disease. As it is, in many cultures, humans are far more tolerant of strange humans than, say, rats and many other organisms are of strangers among their own kind – if a strange rat comes into a rat colony without a proper introduction, the members of the colony will literally tear him to pieces right then and there. That level of xenophobia isn't that common among us, Hannah, though obviously in some places over the ages it's gotten completely out of hand, like lynchings of black men by members of the KKK in the American South, or of white farmers or merchants by black men and women in South Africa around the turn of the century, or what happened to the Jews in Hitler's Germany at the hands of 'good Aryan' Germans. But the instinct is still there, and it gets more and more evident the more crowded we become, because crowding favors the rapid vectoring of epidemic disease, and this is a way of minimizing that: 'Avoid the stranger, lest you die of plague.'

“Unfortunately, when the crowding becomes too great, it can turn deadly – aversion becomes terror and rage, and that's when horrible things happen to people at the hands of other people. And that instinct makes itself known among us in so many ways, Hannah – 'patriotism' turned jingoistic and murderous, 'holy' wars against the 'infidel,' wars that become even uglier than usual because of atrocities committed by soldiers on one side against civilians on the other, the sort of horrors that were perpetrated against 'non-Aryans' in Hitler's Germany and Chinese at the hands of Japanese soldiers during the Rape of Nanking. All of these are spin-offs of increasing human population density first in the Old World, then the New World. The atrocities perpetrated against native Americans by many Europeans who came to this continent after the 15<sup>th</sup> century don't buck that rule, you know, for they were just extensions of what Christians had been doing to Jews and Muslims, Islamists to Christians and Jews and Hindus, Hindus to Muslims, people of one color to those of another, and nation to nation, that had been going on in the Old World for centuries – and was practiced in the New World by Apaches and their close kin against non-apaches, apparently even before Europeans got here.”

“That's no excuse!”

“No, of course not, love,” he said, gently stroking my hair, softly kissing the top of my head again, “certainly not, when it comes to individuals. Why this individual commits an atrocity and that one refrains from doing so, or tries to keep someone else from committing one, depends upon individual character or lack of it. Our courts have always operated on that assumption, which is perfectly in order.

“But when it comes to large populations, it's like thermodynamics: while you can't make any useful predictions about the behavior of a single atom in a gas or even a solid, you can make rock-solid ones about the statistical behavior of the entire population of atoms in it. That's why we can calculate the half-lives of radioactive materials and unstable chemical compounds so well: such-and-such a gas or liquid or solid under so-and-thus conditions of state will behave in precisely predictable ways. And that seems to be true for large populations of organisms of any kind, too. Call it sociodynamics, the science of predicting how, on the average, the members of a given population of organisms will behave in given conditions of one kind or another. For humans, as for all social organisms, the more densely populated a region is with us, the more belligerent and prone to sociopathic behavior we become. Sure, we still have our great saints, our diplomats



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and dedicated doctors and others who try to help others and never do evil of any kind – but we also have more and more breakdowns of civilized behavior among everyone else, as well, until finally it becomes so bad that the result is war, or civil war, and the population gets thinned out for a while, and the underlying problem, that of the likelihood of epidemic disease among us, gets cut down to a minimum again.”

“But what about economic and other factors, including religious antagonisms?”

“Sure, those figure in, too – starving people will do virtually anything to get enough to eat, from theft to murder and cannibalism, something that’s even more true of those dying of thirst, and always there are the intangibles, such as religious and other social factors. But starving people, or people dying of thirst, don’t wage war, Hannah. They’re too weak and stressed to organize as an army and carry out real warfare. As individuals, one of them might try bashing in the head of someone who happens to have a candy-bar or a canteen of water so he can get what the other guy has, but starving people make lousy soldiers. Wars really only happen when the side that starts it has the resources and manpower it needs to do the job, or figures it does, and if everyone is starving or dying of thirst, the makings of an army just don’t exist.

“And as for religious factors, they only really come into play when people are already eyeing their neighbors’ holdings and possessions in a covetous way. Who cares what the other guy believes if he’s starving, or damned close to it, and you’re fat and happy, and everyone around you is either your client or too weak to do squat to you? Remember, Hitler was only able to get the German people to go along with the Final Solution and a nasty high-tech war against Russia and the West after the Germans had been put through years of deprivation by French demands for ruinous reparations.

“Monty can present the details of all this a lot better than I can, but what it comes down to is that bigotry and related attitudes and behavior are really outgrowths of a natural instinct to avoid others who might possibly carry dangerous microorganisms that the homeboys aren’t used to and don’t have an adequate immune response against. The more crowded we are, the stronger that instinct becomes, and the greater the likelihood that we’ll see this difference or that difference between ourselves and a newcomer or even an old neighbor as good reason to hate and fear him. If we’re civilized and enlightened enough, we can control that instinct by conscious determination, channel the way it comes out, but it’s still there, because it’s an ineradicable part of the common genetic heritage possessed by almost all forms of land-life on our world, one of the first lines of defense against the possibility of epidemic disease.

“So it isn’t that odd that Sneaky Rat’s people had that same instinct – in fact, most of the animal life of their time and their world must have had it, at least to some extent, for the same reasons we and the other living beings around us do now. Inevitably, as his people became more and more numerous, and covered the globe in a world-spanning civilization comprising many nations and empires, some of it turned ugly, the way it so often has among us under the same conditions. And they had a lot more fuel for the fire, too, in terms of physical differences among individuals – for example, Sneaky Rat himself came from a strain of his species that tended to ivory-colored bodies with iridescent blue-green stripes along the arms and legs, and cobalt-blue or crimson down and feathers where we would have hair. Others in his own country, which was located in North America, or what was to become North America, had a wide range of color-schemes, such as purple-and-red stripes on a mauve background and violet feathers or down; irregular green-and-brown spots on a gray-brown background (like our camo clothes), with no feathers; yellow stripes on a pearl-white background with bright orange feathers – all sorts of different combinations of colors of skin and hair-like feathers. And there was even more variety among the rest of his world’s nations. They also had giant and dwarf races, like we do our Zulus and pygmies, and many different religions – all sorts of physical and cultural differences, and thus all sorts of reasons to decide to hate one another.

“Of course, they also gave off pheromones, or chemicals like them, the way we do, and the chemistry of these differed slightly between different populations. Not all of them were chemicals you could smell consciously, but like pheromones are with us, they were sensed on a level that was essentially unconscious, causing reactions that were interpreted as what you might call ‘atmosphere’ or ‘aura’: ‘that guy has a creepy aura,’ ‘she brightens up the whole room like sunlight,’ that sort of thing. Another way of telling who belonged in your community, or ought to, and who didn’t, or shouldn’t, evolved out of that ancient, ancient instinct to avoid crowds and thus disease that probably goes all the way back to the early Archaean Eon of Earthly life, billions of years ago.

“Differences in skin color probably came from the same thing Darwin noticed among wild finches in the Galapagos Islands – such differences start cropping up fast in isolated populations of the same species, and if they go on long enough you end up with different species that can’t interbreed any more. The brilliant

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patterns of skin color among Sneaky Rat's people likely had to do with sexual selection, and variants in them came about when, long before they became a global species, populations of them would get isolated in a valley or on an island or whatever. Important differences in height and build, such as between the dwarf and giant races, might have had some basis in sexual selection, too – after all, that happens among human populations – but they could also have been related to availability of food, competitive edges over neighbors, and so on. As for religious and other cultural traits, variants among these had to've come about the same way they do among us – cultural traits that persist for any length of time are always in some way geared to our survival needs, and that had to have been true among Sneaky Rat's people, as well.

“Sneaky Rat himself wasn't bigoted, at least not after he reached middle age – though, as he showed me through his memories, he'd been something of a hellion as a young man, and that included a few episodes he was heartily ashamed of later on. On a number of occasions when he was young, he and some of the macho punks he hung with then went into areas where the 'wrong people' lived and Did Things to them, just like the Klan did to black-skinned Americans in the American South, and kids from middle-class and upper-middle class did to street people, just for the hell of it.

“You have to understand, Sneaky Rat's people were bipedal, featherless, flightless birds, beakless, tailless, toothed birds with hands instead of wings, and a gift for technology and the making of fire and all the complex politics of sapient beings. And if you've ever watched a gang of starlings mobbing an owl, like Monty showed us on that one field trip over to San Bee, or a bunch of crows attacking an outsider crow who tries to enter the group, you can imagine what might have gone on among Sneaky Rat's people at times.”

“He sounds like he became a very good-hearted man later on in life.”

“I'd have to say so, yes. Saint Francis and Saint Augustine started out as rakehells, from what I've heard, but became pillars of their Church later in life. That's not that uncommon – wasn't it Augustine who prayed, just before he gave it all up for Christ, 'Oh, Lord, make me virtuous – but not just yet?'” he told me with an impish smile. “Anyway, yes, Sneaky Rat was a good man – just how good you'll see shortly, when I get to the rest of his story. He was . . . extraordinary.”

“Lord, he sounds almost like . . . like an avatar of Djehuti, the Egyptian God of wisdom and justice, or something. Djehuti – the Egyptian Hermes – was represented with a man's body and a bird's head, you know.”

“Yeah, that's in Monty's collection of books by Crowley and some others, lots of pictures of that God in them.”

“Is it possible that we . . . we somehow remember him, or his people, and those memories have taken the form of Djehuti and related Gods?”

“Anything's possible, love. Monty says that the Gods are the Intelligences behind universal processes, like Thought and Love, Fertility and Death, and Sneaky Rat was just one individual . . . man. But the ways we sense the Gods, the Elohim or Archangels or whatever, and the ways we represent Them and think about Them, take all sorts of forms, so why not? Maybe there is a memory there of Sneaky Rat, or his people, somehow encoded in our genes or in some other way, and it comes out in the way that the ancient Egyptians portrayed the God Djehuti, the way the people who became the Children of Israel pictured the Archangel Raphael, the being which the ancient Greeks envisioned as Hermes and the Norse as Odin. I can sorta see how that might be – Sneaky Rat had a lot of the qualities that are supposed to be associated with Hermes, say, and Odin, especially Odin, what with his eye being injured as a result of the Event. He even had a strong sense of mischief – increasing age tempered it a lot, I think, but you could see the sort of rascalion he'd been as a younger man in that mischievous side of him. Isn't Hermes supposed to be the God of Practical Jokes? Not to mention puns and other linguistic atrocities?” he said, chuckling. “Sneaky Rat had all that in him – so, yes, maybe something has persisted among us, all the way down to this time, of him and his people, that we tend to see in certain Gods.”

“But why would we, if his whole world perished then, after the Event?”

“Not all of it perished, love. I think it'll be evident why that memory of him, and maybe all his people, as well, might have passed down to us from our remote mammalian ancestors that lived through that event when I tell you the rest.

“– At any rate, as I was saying, Sneaky Rat spent the hours when he wasn't refitting and restocking his boat, or sleeping, or eating, prowling around the island to see what, if anything, was left of all that had been there before the Event. And in the course of those explorations, a few days before the boat was finally

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ready and they left the island for North America, while he was checking out the ruins of what had been some sort of military installation, he discovered a short-wave radio that was still operational . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*The radio was in the basement of the complex – like that kindergarten, which had been protected from damage when the building in which it was located caved in on top of it, much of the basement area where Dawn found the radio had been spared the worst of the fiery heat of the Event’s shockwaves and the storms that followed because the building above it had collapsed over it in such a way as to form a thick shield that protected that basement from everything the Event could dish out. Later, apparently, part of the basement ceiling had collapsed under the weight of all those tons of brick and stone and steel and wood the Event had deposited on it, and when it did, an opening into the basement had appeared in the rubble, which Dawn discovered while poking around in the ruins of the building.*

*The radio, which was still in operation, was running off gigantic hydrogen cells housed in a much deeper sublevel of the building and were thus, like the radio, spared from the holocaust that had destroyed the rest. The antenna of the radio had been housed in a long pipe that ran up the side of the building, and it was shot to shit, but replacements for it and other parts for the radio were stored near the batteries in boxes clearly labeled as such, and it didn’t take Dawn long to set up a working antenna for the radio. Up to that point, it had been just something to occupy his time, a curiosity and little more. But when he started tuning the radio, playing with the frequencies, suddenly, between bursts of static, he heard what was unmistakably a voice saying, in his own language, “– Anyone at all? If you can hear us, please answer!” Whoever it was said it twice more, then started rattling off a description of the number of people there with the speaker, their general situation, and their location.*

*They were broadcasting from the southern reaches of Eastern Gond! And somehow their signal had made it all the way from there to Ororet’s Dream, which was located a long way north of Eastern Gond, in the midst of the Tethyan Seaway . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“– It was coming from Africa!

“By ‘Africa,’ of course, I mean the landmasses that would later form the continent we know by that name today,” said Paul. “Even so, a great deal of that continent was already in place at the end of the Cretaceous, in roughly the same relationship to the equator and the Earth’s poles of rotation that it has now. So those signals had to travel thousands of miles to reach that island in the Tethys Seaway, not far from the young Atlantic, where Sneaky Rat listened incredulously to the radio, and do it through layers of atmosphere that were still wracked with massive turbulence and electrostatic upheavals left over from the Event. Imagine someone trying to thread the eye of a needle from a mile away through thick, storm-tossed hedges of thorn and bracken at twilight – that’s how dicey Sneaky Rat’s reception of that signal was. As it was, the people doing the broadcast must have had one helluva powerful broadcasting station! Even so, what with the upper layers of the post-Event atmosphere almost as static-filled and uncooperative as they would have been after a global, all-out thermonuclear war, it was a miracle that their signal was able to reach the island at all.

“– And it was an even greater miracle that Sneaky Rat just happened to tune into them when they did. For time was running out for the people who were broadcasting that afternoon. Listening in horror to that broadcast, Sneaky Rat learned that they were transmitting from what had been a great university in a city founded by Sneaky Rat’s own nation as an experiment in colonialism, part of his nation’s attempts to expand into as much of the world as possible and thereby hold its own against the other great imperial powers of that time. Wherever Sneaky Rat’s species had originally arisen, either they had never really colonized Africa until late in the game, or if, as we did, they had come from there originally, they had subsequently died out there, and were only coming back to it after countless millennia had elapsed, the same way that horses first appeared in North America, spread to the rest of the world, died out in their native land, and were finally repatriated to it by European explorers and colonists. Which was the case wasn’t clear. Though he was well-educated and highly intelligent, Sneaky Rat wasn’t a paleontologist or dromeologist – his species’ equivalent of an anthropologist – and what little he knew about the subject was mostly conjecture. What it

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boiled down to was that Africa had been colonized to any extent by his species and his nation only during the fifty years or so leading up to the Event. The colonies had been intelligently planned and directed, and up until the Event, they were doing perhaps better than might have been expected. But there weren't many of them, and the entire . . . sapient population of Africa just before the Event might have been about, oh, say, a hundred thousand people . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*At least half of them had died in the immediate aftermath of the Event, as first searing heat and then killing cold swept down upon the more northerly portions of Eastern Gond, blighting and killing outright almost every creature living there. Then the aftereffects of the Event did so much damage to the northern portion of Eastern Gond's surviving ecosystems that most of the creatures there that had survived the Event itself must have died of starvation and disease within a very short while, what with the bottom of the food-web having been knocked out in so many places.*

*But the more southerly portions of the continent, among them the city from which the broadcast originated, had been spared the gigantic tsunamis, the earthquakes, the rains of fire and acid. The worst that the southern portion of Eastern Gond had sustained so far was damage due to huge ocean-born storms and extreme weather, and from sudden, vast migrations of all sorts of creatures that normally never went that far south, such as numerous birds, pteranodons, herds of large herbivorous dinosaurs and the carnosaurs that preyed on them, flying wetas and other insects, and a vast host of other creatures. A lot of the wildlife in the area had nevertheless managed to survive, including a large number of native insects such as certain moths, butterflies, and social insects, along with the plant-life and fungi upon which they depended for their survival. But the cultivars planted by the colonists weren't doing at all well in the face of all those thronging hordes of incoming herbivorous vertebrates and insects not native to the region. In addition, their warehouses and granaries were quickly invaded and ravaged by everything from tiny mammals and much larger archosauria to great big hungry cockroaches, which had been around for nearly two and a half billion years and, Dawn thought, would probably be the last things on Earth to go when everything else was extinct. At the time of the Event, there were over twenty-three thousand people in that city, intelligent and well-educated people, many of them highly skilled technicians as well as scholars and scientists of great repute, but they were dependent on civilization to make up the shortfall when their agricultural and other resources weren't sufficient for their needs. Among them were farmers, of course – no intelligently planned colony on a little-known continent would be without them – and they had been planning on huge expansions of their agricultural and stock-breeding activities. If the Event had held off just a few more years, they might actually have made it, because by then, they would have had a self-sustaining resource base, a pharmaceutical and biomedical industry that could have filled all their medical needs, and everything else they would have needed to survive on their own with no input or imports from the mother country.*

*But it didn't hold off, and they were caught fatally short. Now they were low on food, running just as low on medical supplies, many of their medical personnel already dead from various diseases or from encounters with all those animals coming at them from the north or from lethal encounters with local wildlife, and unable to use most of their arable land, either, because it had been churned up so badly by invading animals as well as by those terrible storms right after the Event. Too civilized for their own good, without a community of herders or huntsmen or fishermen who would have had the skills to wrest a living for most of them from the seas or lakes and rivers or the land, they were starving and dying from disease . . .*

“They were begging for help, Hannah, begging for help from anyone who might hear them and come to their rescue. They had gained some idea of what had happened to the world from broadcasts they'd picked up right after the Event from northern North America, colonies in the southern parts of South America, and southern Eurasia, and personnel in scientific stations in the giant traveling island that would someday, after it had joined up with the great continent to its north, become India, and they were pleading, in the names of all their Gods and their species, for anyone who heard them to put aside all national and ethnic differences and come join them, help them out in exchange for what little they had to give as well as wide-open lands relatively untouched by the Event.

“Even as Sneaky Rat listened to that broadcast, tears in his eyes, the first speaker, whose voice had grown ever weaker and hoarser throughout the broadcast, finally coughed and choked and collapsed. She was replaced by another speaker, a man who was much older than she, a professor of physics at the university. He made much the same plea as the woman before him had – they were all probably working from a script, all those who broadcast from there, saying the same things over and over and over: Come help us. Come help us in the name of your species, in the name of your common heritage with us, and the Gods we all worship. We will give you whatever we can, and there is all this unoccupied land which is yours to do with as you wish, if you will just put aside any ethnic, philosophical, or national differences from us and come help us, in the name of the Gods! And then the transmission suddenly turned to heavy static, the voice from Africa fading and dying as the outraged atmosphere once more became flooded with the electromagnetic Furies that had been birthed by the Event . . .”

## **Chapter 7: Going Home**

*As sad and horrifying as the broadcast and its implications were, and as frustrating as its sudden termination by the meteorological chaos that had raged through the world's atmosphere ever since the Event was to him, it gave Dawn the first real hope he'd felt in many, many days. Radio signals could punch all that way through to Ororet's Dream, even from thousands of miles away, in spite of what the Event had done to the atmosphere's Heavyside layers – the horrifying wounds carved into the world by the Event were finally beginning to heal, however slowly. And somewhere out there was land that hadn't been touched by the Event, where people could somehow survive if they could remember the old skills, how to hunt, how to fish, how to gather herbs and roots from the bountiful land, how to live without all the technological advances on which most of his species had come to depend so heavily in the last 450 years or so. Survival was really possible! If, as he suspected, little or nothing was left in North Sandstone of his people and their civilization and the ecosystems that had sustained them, there was still a place to go, where a man might live free, live well off the land. There might even be some survivors among his people if he went there after his pilgrimage home to North Sandstone, and if he found any survivors in North Sandstone itself, he could take them there, too. There were stocks there in Eastern Gond that would eventually repopulate the world with its abundant forms of life, there and in other far-flung places in the southern hemisphere. Life could go on! Life would go on – and if he made it there, he and whoever he might find in North Sandstone, he and they would go on with it.*

*So with new hope in his heart, gently teasing the radio out of its niche so he could take it back to the launch, he returned to the facility where he'd been working on the boat. Yip, whom, as always, he'd taken with him on his walk, chattered at him all the way, as if asking excited questions about what he'd found and what it meant. And all the way back to the boat, wondering just how much, if anything, Yip understood of what he told the little mammal, he told Yip what he'd found, about the voices he'd heard coming from it and what they meant, and that it meant that there was at least one place in the world where they could go and be safe, where they'd have a chance at a real life, even if North Sandstone was the total wreck he feared it was.*

*Did Yip understand any of it? He couldn't be sure. Yip had shown a real knack for picking up oft-repeated sounds Dawn made and making them, or a relatively understandable approximation of them, back at Dawn, in appropriate contexts, sounds such as the words Dawn used when he asked Yip if he was hungry (“Want something to eat?”) or whether he needed to use his potty (“Need the potty box?”) or if he'd like to go for a walk (“Want to go out with me?”). Obviously the little animal was highly intelligent, not only able to remember and repeat back to Dawn certain sounds Dawn made to him, but make them in situations that showed that Yip understood what they meant. And he'd learned to do this on his own – it was nothing Dawn had trained him to do. Yip uttered them with a strange sort of concentrated effort in a way he made no other sounds, as if he were doing his best to make sure he didn't mispronounce them – and he succeeded, for it was relatively easy for Dawn to understand him when Yip made such sounds, as opposed to the machine-gun fire of chatter which Yip and his kind usually used with one another or when reporting something highly annoying or exciting.*

*But what did Yip understand of what Dawn told him of what had happened to the world, or about North Sandstone, Dawn's home, or about Eastern Gond, where they might go if North Sandstone was the*

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*shambles Dawn feared it would be? What did Yip get out of Dawn's occasional discourses on what he'd picked up about physics and chemistry and astronomy and other abstract subjects in his time? Did he make anything out of the artwork that Dawn showed him in the various books and newspapers and other media that the previous crew of the boat had left behind in it, or which the former occupants of the great marina where they now worked on the boat had left strewn all over the place? What did Yip think of the music tapes which Dawn had found aboard the launch and frequently played on the tape-deck in the navigator's cabin?*

*There was no telling. Clearly Yip, like all his kind, was a brainy little cuss, but beyond that there was no sure way to measure his intelligence beyond observations of the little guy's ability to solve the various problems that came his way: How to go from the floor of the launch's little kitchen up to the table-top where Dawn put out a dish of food for him at mealtimes (that was easy enough, he just jumped up onto a stool next to the table and from there to the table-top); how to make Dawn understand that his potty-box's litter needed to be changed (Yip, like most of his species, was very particular about his hygiene, and did not like to have to use very dirty litter for his potty; usually he made his wants in this area known to Dawn by standing in the door to the head and chattering an angry blue streak until Dawn took the hint, came in to see what had Yip so upset, and change the litter in the box); how to tell Dawn he'd hurt his foot on a splinter, and that he needed to have the splinter taken out and his foot cleaned and dressed (he solved that problem by making a particularly shrill cry until Dawn picked him up, then holding out the injured foot for inspection while looking up at Dawn with a pleading expression); how to take down an enormous and nasty-tempered beetle, of a size and a species wholly unknown to Dawn, that appeared in the launch's kitchen one evening and, hissing and rearing up when it saw Yip, definitely regarded Yip as *The Enemy* and tried its level best to do the mammal in before Yip could do for it (Yip solved that problem by emitting a series of head-splittingly shrill cries that brought Dawn at the run; upon finding out what had Yip so excited, grabbing a nearby spatula, Dawn simply bashed the angry beetle, which was perhaps an inch longer than Yip and weighed at least as much as the small mammal, into a greenish-black paste while Yip exultantly danced and pranced all around, uttering a series of war-cries and praise-songs about his great and wonderful Daddy, Dawn, and the heroic way in which Daddy did in the *Awful Green-Black Thing in the kitchen*). From what Dawn, alternatively amused and rather awed, had seen of Yip's approach to problem-solving, if all his kind were as good as Yip was at taking on brand-new, hitherto unknown challenges and dispatching them intelligently, given another geological era or two, Dawn's people were going to have some serious competition for dominance of the planet – or would have had, anyway, if not for the Event, Dawn thought gloomily. Given that Yip and his species were native to North Sandstone, they might perish along with Dawn's people in the aftermath of the Event, leaving the world to whatever other fauna might have managed to make it through in Eastern Gond, say, or Deccan . . .*

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“Paul, what did Yip look like? I mean, you've compared his species to both rats and ferrets. Did he look like a cross between them, or what?”

“Uh, a little like overlarge, gracile, very active ferrets – more than anything else that I've ever seen, he resembled modern reconstructions of *Purgatorius*, a Paleocene proto-primate. Yip himself looked something like a sable ferret, brown fur with a bandit-mask of darker fur, and lighter patches on his belly, chin, and other places, but larger, say, about the size of a medium-sized dog, and with large, pointed ears like a cat's. When Sneaky Rat first found him on the launch, it was not very long after the Winter Solstice in the Southern Hemisphere – though in that tropical climate it wouldn't have made much difference as to the temperatures – and Yip had shed his Summer coat months before, so he had a lot fewer light patches than he would during the Summer. His tail was covered with bushy fur, like a ferret's, rather than being naked, like a rat's. But in the wild, his kind tended to live in colonies, like rats, rather than alone or, in the case of nesting females, with only their kits, the way weasels do. The females had litters of three or four at a time, about once a year; because they lived in fairly large underground colonies, their kits had much better chances of survival than wild ferret and weasel kits do now, because all the adults took part in defending all the young whenever danger threatened, and would take turns baby-sitting one another's kits.

“They also had hands, small ones, but very like those of monkeys, with five clearly defined digits each, one of them being an opposable thumb. They were carnivorous, but also could and did eat large quantities

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of fruit, and liked the occasional side of salad – they’d eat the contents of the stomachs and upper intestines of prey they caught, usually small herbivores with a gut full of partially digested plant-food. So they had molars as well as carnassials and incisors, usually 28 teeth in a healthy adult. Their skulls were long and slender, and their muzzles were tapered almost to a point, like a rat’s – they were built for tunnels, the way weasels are, adapted to seek out things that lived in tunnels or which could be accessed via tunnels, and looked a bit like their prey, with a face like a rat’s and a body that could almost ooze its way through cracks in the ground, the way Bill’s ferrets do. But their eyes were bigger than a ferret’s, and adapted well for day-vision – they had diurnal habits, and needed good vision, both black-and-white and color.”

“I wonder what one of Bill’s ferrets would do if it found itself facing Yip?” I mused, smiling a little at the idea.

“Probably try to fight to the death with him,” Paul told me, his expression serious. “Yip’s species had its own distinctive odor, probably nothing like a mustelid’s, though they did have scent glands at the base of the tail like those of a ferret. They’d have regarded each other as The Enemy and gone straight for the throat – in a lot of ways, especially when it came to fighting, the two species seem to be rather similar, especially when it comes to close-in fighting: *carpe jugulum and hang on until the other guy is dead.*

*“In fact, Yip would have regarded most modern mammals his size or smaller as either easy prey or a deadly enemy. As far as the prey goes, he’d have been right – his fangs and incisors were very sharp, and could shear right through fur and hide on animals like our rabbits, say, without any problem at all. Anything else – well, if you put up all three of Big Bill’s big ginger tomcats against Yip simultaneously, I’d bet on Yip. Typically members of Yip’s species were somewhat faster than greased lightning when it came to putting the moves on an opponent, with jaws like ‘gators as far as their ability to clamp down on something and hold on went, and a mind for strategy more devious than Francis Marion or Belisarius or Vladimir Tsepes. One hell of a fighter – I think the only reason he left that big beetle he ran up against in the launch’s kitchen for Sneaky Rat was to share the spoils of victory with his Daddy, unless maybe it just weirded him out so badly he figured it was a ghost or monster of some kind or something else beyond anything he could handle.”*

*“They must have made good pets – Yip’s species, I mean.”*

*“According to what I saw through Sneaky Rat’s mind, they did. Sneaky Rat’s people kept them in nurseries, to guard their babies from things that might harm them, like small predators that got in sometimes, or poisonous insects, that sort of thing, kind of like the mongoose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi in Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. They made great companions for children and old people – they tended to be very understanding of the limitations of small children, being careful not to let a child grab them the wrong way but not doing more than nipping the child when it did anyway, and they were excellent watch-animals, warning the household of intruders or a fire or other danger. Kind of like Siamese cats today.”*

*“Do you think our modern carnivores descended from them?”*

*“Well . . . wait and see,” he told me, smiling a little, as if at some hidden joke. “Anyway, as I was saying, Sneaky Rat took the radio he’d found back to the launch and hooked it up to the launch’s power-supply. During the nights that followed, he listened to it frequently, trying to pick up more of the elusive signals from Africa or anywhere else where men and women might yet survive. He hoped against hope that one such signal would come through from North America, though he knew that wasn’t likely. But that anyone, anywhere, had managed to survive, and, on top of that, had managed to punch a signal through the egregiously ionized Heavyside layers of the atmosphere across thousands of miles of storm-wracked land and sea, seemed miracle enough all by itself. And surely, he thought, this too had to be yet another message from his Goddess not to lose hope, not to give up, that She was watching out for him and would take care of him, and that She had a job for him to complete before his time was done . . .”*

\* \* \* \* \*

*By then, the launch was about as ship-shape as it was ever going to be. Dawn had put in a tremendous amount of work on it, repairing it and restocking it, and it seemed eminently seaworthy, with more than enough supplies aboard to get them to North Sandstone in good condition. During the weeks they’d been there on Ororet’s *Dream*, between recurrent storms and, perhaps, the appetites of hungry sea-beasts no longer all that picky about how long their food had been dead, much of the harbor and the jetty*

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*that connected it with the ocean had become cleared of debris and floating corpses. Not only were the breaks in the clouds becoming more and more frequent, but there had been several calm, clear days that would have seemed absolutely beautiful if not for the horrors they revealed throughout the island.*

*– And if they didn't get going soon, the stench of decomposing corpses beginning to rise everywhere on Ororet's Dream would soon become overpowering. It was time to go.*

*Dawn stayed one more day in order to make another foray into town, to that schoolroom he'd found under the rubble of the school, after carefully tying a cloth anointed with a mentholated lubricant gel over his nose and mouth, to keep out the stench. In the schoolroom, he carefully removed the artwork and photographs of the children that he'd found on the room's long walls, putting them all into a large accordion-folder he found in the supply cabinets at the back of the room. This would be those children's memorial. He could do nothing else for them, but at least, if he finally found a safe refuge somewhere in the world, he might be able to pass the portfolio on to others, as a remembrance of the world they had lost, and of what its future might yet be.*

*He wondered if he was being a fool. With so many countless millions of children dead around the world, why should he work so hard to preserve the memory of only a few tens of them? Perhaps it was because it was there, in their schoolroom, that he'd found that copy of The Book of the Lady of Battles – She had chosen to reveal Her will to him there, so these children were, in effect, Her messengers. He couldn't pass by without doing something for them. This was all he could do – but maybe it would be enough. He remembered an old saying: "Our children don't inherit the Earth from us – rather, we borrow it from them for a little while. It's up to us to take good care of their property in the meantime." Maybe, he mused, someday, in some way, he'd be able to repay the loan, with interest. Saving these priceless reminders of his people's children could, the Gods be willing, be a decent start in that direction.*

*The next day dawned calm and clear. Taking it as a good omen, an hour or so after the Sun had arisen, Dawn fired up the launch's motor and slowly, carefully, maneuvered it out of its slip and through the open doors of the installation that led to the harbor.*

*There was still plenty of wreckage and debris filling the harbor, as well as a few derelict craft which, loose from their moorings since the Event, had somehow managed to stay afloat. But there were also wide-open lanes between areas where the worst of the mess had collected, lanes that linked one with another all the way to the jetty. In the blessed sunlight, using binoculars he'd found stowed in a locker in the navigator's cabin, Dawn could see that the jetty, in its turn, seemed to be free of obstructions. He was sure that was an illusion wrought by an ill-conceived marriage of distance and wish-fulfillment. But, as with the harbor, time, storms, the tendency of rotten things to settle to the bottom and be devoured by bottom-feeders, in concert with the depredations of bigger marine beasts, had cleared out enough of the crap that had clogged the jetty that it should be a fairly easy route out to the ocean.*

*Which, in fact, it proved to be – but it was also a heart-breaking one for Dawn, who, as a devotee of the Lady of Battles, the Protector of the Living World and the Throne of Heaven, had long been fascinated by the enormous variety of living creatures in the world, and had loved its wealth of life. Once into the jetty, he found the waters there filled with the rotting remains of ammonites, other nautiloids, marine slugs, rudist bivalves, rare forms of sea algae, brittle stars, horseshoe crabs, and countless other unfortunate specimens of marine life. Swimming through and around the noisome clumps of such remains, he could see the occasional living hagfish, marine catfish, and other carrion- and detritus-feeders; such organisms were probably responsible for a good deal of the clearing-out that had already been accomplished in the harbor and the jetty, and he whispered a brief prayer of thanks to them and their tutelary Gods for their good work. He also noticed that some of the dead beasts had their counterparts among the living, such as a number of echinoderms and larger mollusks, so whatever had killed their fallen brethren hadn't managed to kill off their various species. Even so, far more species were represented among the dead than the living there in those murky carrion waters, and he had a feeling that many of those species would never be seen alive in the world again.*

*Why there were so many dead creatures there in the seawater there he wasn't sure. It probably had something to do with the radical shift in pH of the marine environment, thanks to acid rain fallout from the Event. But it could also have involved a quick die-off of krill and the other tiny beings at the base of the marine food web, on which so many larger organisms depended for food – the sudden deep darkness and freezing cold caused by the Event had lasted long enough by now to have killed off all the phytoplankton on which all other marine life depended for its survival.*



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*Or perhaps he was seeing something purely local in its effects, maybe due to the release into the waters around Ororet's Dream of complex chemicals from runoff from shattered factories, fuel depots, chemical storage units, and other sources of materials that never appeared naturally in the living world, but were instead the product of engineering and industry. If so, then much more sea-life should have survived and be recovering nicely around the less developed islands and continental shores of the world, in which case maybe the world would soon be back to relative normality, at least the marine portions of it.*

*Dawn hoped with all his heart to be able to prove out that last hypothesis on his way to North Sandstone. There were many islands between this one and his home continent, many of them virtually untouched by civilization in any way, some of them small tropical paradises, others harsh little inhospitable, harborless piles of rock that were home to seabirds and pteranodons and insects and damned little else. The state of the waters around those islands would tell him much about how the world as a whole was faring, especially the life of its oceans and seas. Other larger, more developed islands would serve him as refueling and refitting stations, and through comparison between them and the relatively unsettled islands he could get a better idea of the differences between the waters around them and the offshore environment of the less developed islands. If only the oceanic environment of the developed islands had suffered the sort of tremendous die-offs as the waters around this one had, with the waters around the undeveloped islands in more or less the same state they'd been in for the last countless millennia, then the great losses of life he had seen so far could be chalked up to the impact of the Event on islands which had been taken over by civilization. Otherwise . . .*

*What Dawn feared was that everywhere he would find the same devastation, with only relative handfuls of families of creatures left alive among the rotting remains of what had been near-countless forms of marine life. If so, then clearly the world had gone through yet another Great Extinction of the sort that had closed out the Permian and, before it, the Ordovician period of Earthly life. He waited for the next landfall with equal parts trepidation and hope – hope that his fears would turn out to be unwarranted, and a leaden, persistent hunch that those fears weren't misplaced.*

*Finally they emerged from the jetty into the open ocean. The going had been much easier than the earlier one they had taken from the ocean into the harbor when they first arrived at Ororet's Dream. Save for great anvils of cumulus on the far eastern horizon, their tops shining like white fire in the radiant sunlight, their bases dark gray-blue and purplish-black with their cargos of unshed rain and barely-leashed lightning, the sky was completely clear, a vast bowl of brilliant azure above the enormous gray-green plate of the ocean. In spite of everything, standing in the navigator's cabin, wind whipping through the side-ports he'd opened there in order to ventilate the cabin while they had good weather, staring out into the endless distances of sea and sky beyond, Dawn felt good to be alive. Yip, who clearly was full of high spirits, cavorted and gamboled about his feet, making mock-rushes at shadows, sending up long, running trills of joyous celebration as he did so.*

*"Hey, fella," Dawn told him, smiling a little, as he bent down and picked up the little mammal, "you sure look like one happy camper! Well, it won't be too long until we're home, and then maybe we can find some friends for you, what do you think about that?"*

*"Yeek!" Yip cheered. "Yi-yi-yi-yeep!" he added, looking intently into Dawn's eyes as the man held him up so that the two of them could see eye to eye.*

*"Maybe in a month or so we'll be home, long before the storms get really bad," Dawn told him. "We'll stop here and there to pick up fuel and supplies, but we won't stay long, unless we have some sort of accident on the way. If we do get delayed, we'll put in to some safe harbor and overwinter there – I don't fancy putting into port back home during the Winter," he said thoughtfully. "Too rough a ride, and only the Gods know what we'll find waiting there, as it is. My home gets some damned cold Winters – we really don't need to put up with that, do we?"*

*"Yeek!"*

*"Damn right. Okay, Yip, here we go . . ." Dawn told the mammal, gently setting him back down on the floor, then stepping back up to the wheel. The launch was running on its inertial guidance system, which Dawn had carefully programmed for the voyage home before they left the island, and he didn't really need to do anything unless an emergency came up. But he remembered how good it had felt to pilot his own sailboat as a young man, and to take the wheel of a military transport during his days in the Corps during the North Island Blockade; and for a while he stood with his hands on the inert wheel, now disengaged*

*from the steering mechanisms while the computer did the piloting, staring out across the ocean beyond toward North Sandstone, now hidden from view by the curvature of the Earth, as it would be for a good while to come.*

*By and large, from then on until they came within first sight of the coastline of North Sandstone, their days passed without serious incident. To be sure, they had to weather a number of violent storms, and they encountered several unexpected navigational hazards in the form of capsized liners, downed aircraft, and other wrack and rubble of a shattered civilization that had come down too close to now-extensive shoals and broken reefs off the shores of various islands and archipelagos. Storms and tsunamis birthed by the Event had, in many cases, piled up a great deal of churned-up material from the ocean bottom around numerous islands and continental shorelines, and fallout raining down from the stratosphere over the months following the Event had added to the mess. Eventually debris from wrecked ships, boats, and aircraft of all kinds had drifted onto these shoals and reefs, making them larger and more hazardous yet.*

*But the radar unit on the launch, which made continuous 360-degree scans of everything around as well as beneath the launch, below the waterline, did its work perfectly, keeping the onboard computers advised of possible problems ahead in plenty of time for the computers to make the necessary course adjustments to keep them out of harm's way. They did have a few bad moments in the harbor of one of the islands where they stopped on their way to North Sandstone, the result of an unexpected underwater mountain of debris that was hidden from the radar by a curve in the harbor's surrounding cliffs until they were almost on top of it. But Dawn was able to avoid the dangerous obstruction by dint of some fast and fancy piloting (all he had to do to take the launch off automatic and put it on manual steering was to squeeze the bottom of the pilot's wheel, hard, where it was marked in red for that purpose; by a stroke of luck or the grace of the Lady of Battles he'd been in the navigator's cabin by the wheel at the time the near-disaster occurred, and was able to take control well before the launch would otherwise have struck the great pile of detritus). Otherwise, as far as navigational hazards and that sort of thing went, there were few problems.*

*Even the fickle Gods of weather seemed to cooperate, storms coming less and less frequently and with much less energy than they'd displayed during the first few weeks after the Event, with longer and longer periods of calm, clear weather. That would change soon, of course, what with Winter coming on, but as the distance to North Sandstone steadily decreased day by day, Dawn became confident that they'd make landfall well before the Hunter's Moon, which this year would fall on Hunter's Day, the beginning of that half of the year ruled by the Destroyer, the consort of the Lady of Battles. A good omen? Well, perhaps not, maybe just a coincidence. As Dawn's civilization had been well aware for thousands of years, the cycles of the Moon were utterly predictable, as were the Solstices and Equinoxes. Hunter's Day was halfway between the Autumnal Equinox and the Winter Solstice, just as the Lady's Day was halfway between the Vernal Equinox and the Summer Solstice, part of traditions that went back to times so ancient that written records of them were virtually nonexistent, when men had measured the positions of the celestial bodies and the cycles of the year by means of circles of huge standing-stones laid out on sacred hills. If this were an omen, one would have to believe that the Lady and Her Lord had somehow arranged the Event to occur this year rather than some other, and in fact had arranged it and the devastation it had wrought in the first place, as well – an idea that no professional theologian, let alone a layman like himself, would want to touch with a ten-foot pole!*

*And he didn't have that much time to play with ideas like that, anyway, now that they were finally approaching North Sandstone and the numerous islands, large and small, that lay off its long eastern coast. He didn't even have that much time for sleep – quite a few times he had to take the launch off automatic and pilot it manually, thanks to the shoals that tended to accumulate around and between the islands as well as the flotsam that was now beginning to make an appearance as they drew closer to the coast and the continent itself finally became visible in the form of long, low, dark lines of mountains and hills just above the western horizon. The sea-junk they were now beginning to encounter consisted mainly of large chunks of floating lumber and dead trees, but in many cases there were also bits and pieces of the remains of boats, aircraft, even buildings caught up in the wreckage, along with almost totally skeletonized carcasses, complete and otherwise, of men, women, children, household pets, food animals, wild beasts, birds, pteranodons – even before they had reached this point, still far out from the coast, with North Sandstone still just below the western horizon, the ocean was already becoming a floating necropolitan zoo. Fortunately, few of the remains he could see caught up in the wreckage bore any flesh;*

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*time, weather, scavenging birds and crustaceans and other arthropods and ever-present necrotrophic bacteria and fungi had stripped these pitiful testimonies of the effects of the Event on the nearing continent down to the bare bones, so that there was little if anything left of them to putrefy – otherwise the air here would have long since become unbreathable. As it was, the smell wasn't pleasant, but there was none of the overpowering universal stench of death that had begun to pervade Ororet's Dream by the time he had finally put out to sea again from that haunted island.*

*Now they were coming up into the long, south-facing Bight of Summer Winds and the sheltered Broken-Tree Bay, nestled almost at the exact center of the long arc of the Bight. Bountiful, the city where he had lived for so long with his great family, was situated right on the bay. It wouldn't be long, now, until he knew whether any of his spouses, co-spouses, children and grandchildren, cousins, or neighbors had survived the devastation of the Event. Bountiful should have been protected from the tsunamis by the peculiar topography of Broken-Tree Bay, which, like some fractal spur of the Mandelbröt set, was connected to the Bight by a very narrow neck which at its widest was no more than a 20<sup>th</sup> that of the diameter of the bay itself, and perhaps, just perhaps. . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“The memory of Sneaky Rat's last night at home before he'd departed for Hunter's Paradise, where he'd lived out the Event and the first days of its aftermath, came back to him again and again as they neared Broken-Tree Bay. It had been a beautiful late Spring evening, and he and his spouses and co-spouses had gathered in the great ballroom of the main house on their estate to dance the night away under the stars that shone down through the vast tempered-glass pane that roofed over the ballroom. Their resident musicians had been at their best that night, providing them with the traditional dance melodies that all of them loved so much, music comparable to our Strauss waltzes and the works of Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninoff, Debussy and Vartinov. Above all, Sneaky Rat remembered the way he and his First Wife, Starlight-Dancing-on-Midnight-Waters (they all called her 'Star' for short, and sometimes 'Lucky Star' – she was the light of all their lives, loved by them all, had borne at least six children, two of them Sneaky Rat's, and was mother in spirit to all their children) had danced together again and again, gliding over the vast floor of the room like birds swooping over the clear blue waters of Where-the-Gods-Drink, the big lake up behind their estate. Star had been dressed in a crimson gown lovely as firelight, and all the heat and passion of Spring seemed to emanate from her as he clasped her close to him in the dance. Later, when they were alone together in her bedroom, he had run his big hands through the long, satiny turquoise strands of her head-feathers. They fell clear to her hips, like a waterfall in some enchanted land in one of the wonder-tales he had so loved as a boy, so soft and smooth, falling around her like a cloak as he carefully undid her clothing and drew it off her still-lovely body.

“She was so beautiful, so beautiful – the years and the children she had borne and raised had only increased the crystalline, impossible loveliness that she had had as a girl, so that now, in middle age, she easily put any woman half her age in the shade whenever she came into a gathering, splendid as a star among the flickering candles that were her would-be rivals, every head in the room turning toward her, men and women both unable to take their eyes away from the glory that was Star. And yet she never gloated over her triumphs, never lorded it over other women – she was still the kindest and dearest and most loving of all the people Sneaky Rat had ever known in his life, male or female, and even other women couldn't resist her charm and the aura of loving-kindness she radiated at them even the worst of times.

“Laughing merrily, once he had removed the last of her clothing, the tips of his fingers brushing the oh-so-soft, warm skin of her throat, her belly, her thighs as he undressed her, she had in return run her hands through the gray-shot, sea-blue stubble on his own pate, which he had still kept cut bristle-short in the classic military fashion. And then, laughing her delicate, silvery laugh, she had begun to unbutton his shirt, and then undo his belt, her own fingers touching him here, there, the delicate grace of her caresses slowly awakening all the fires of Spring in the deepest caverns of his body, his soul . . .

“And all that night the strains of one piece of music they'd danced to, his favorite, kept going through his head,” Paul said, bending down to pick up his guitar from where it sat propped against the bench. “Something like this . . .” he said, picking out the introductory chords of a song, his voice rendering it so heart-breakingly sweet I almost began weeping:

I've never seen you lookin' so lovely as you did tonight . . .<sup>30</sup>

## Chapter 8: Following a Constant Star

“That’s an old, old song, ‘The Lady in Red,’ by this Irish guy, Chris de Burgh, that came out in the early ‘90s,” Paul told me. “Of course, it’s one of ours, not the one that Sneaky Rat and Star danced to that last night before he left for Hunter’s Paradise. But de Burgh’s song is a lot like that other one, and has the same feeling to it.

“Anyway, all the way up through the Bight of Summer Winds, heading for Broken-Tree Bay and his family’s estate, that song kept playing itself in Sneaky Rat’s head, in his heart, and he grew more and more afraid of what he would find when he finally reached his home . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Would Star still be alive, waiting for him, welcoming him home? Would Dawn’s other wives, his co-husbands, any of their children still be there? He thought of how much that song reminded him of the Lady of Battles, Who was always dressed in scarlet. On his birthday, two years before, Star had given him a pack of cards of the sort his people venerated because such card-packs were used as teaching aids for study of the Lady’s holy scriptures, but also because of its usefulness for the playing of games of chance and skill. The Lady of Battles was not averse to fun – on the contrary, after opening prayers, reading of various items of news, and other preliminaries to training, teachers in the dojos in Her temples would initiate practice among the students by saying, “Now, go have fun.”*

*Like all such standardized packs, this one had 55 Trumps; five Persons – Child, Mother, Father, Grandmother/Teacher, and Grandfather/Teacher – and five Suits (Staves/Fire, Goblets/Water, Metal/Wind, Loaves (or Bread)/Earth, and Clouds/Void (Chaos)) in their Court Cards, making 25 Court Cards overall; and the same five Suits of the Lower Arcana, each of which included eight cards, ranking numerically from 1 to 10, making 36 in all. Exquisitely executed by hand in oils on cardboard with the texture and feel of ceramic and the flexibility of heavy paper, the pack Star had given him was a jewel of a thing, a true work of art in its own right, and much finer than the packs one could purchase in boutiques and temple shops and online stores. In this pack, the Lady was presented in the form of a tall, slender woman dancing in the midst of flames, eight-armed, a sword, staff, or other close-in weapon in every hand, Her serene face and graceful body so beautiful it almost hurt to look at Her. Around Her long, slender neck was a huge necklace on which swung the skulls of the demons She battled and destroyed in Her sacred role as Protector of Heaven and Earth. She wore only sheer draperies of brilliant crimson and scarlet, the colors of the very Fire of Life, which did nothing to hide Her beautiful body, Her skin the color of outer space, patterned with random starbursts of coral, crimson, scarlet, cerise, and snow-white, bright crimson feathers over Her genitals and under Her arms. Her mouth, its bright red tongue lolling out so far that its tip was well below Her fiery red underjaw, was open in what might have been a moan of ecstasy or a scream of rage, or, more likely, both, belying Her serene blue eyes. The snaky locks of feathers on Her head, the colors of fresh snow mingled with flowing blood, danced about Her as if alive in their own right – which indeed they were, being the spirit-snakes that give warning of approaching foes or danger. Green grass and massed early-Spring wildflowers shot up beneath Her dancing feet; scattered among them were the severed extremities, head, torso, and genitalia of Her husband, Tiyana, the Destroyer, His eyes closed and lips gently curved in an expression of unutterable bliss. Around the Lady shimmered a rainbow aura that scintillated and changed colors as you moved the card back and forth in the light, a trick due to the quasi-hologrammatic properties of the card-stock. Behind Her, in the background, was a huge volcano in eruption. At Her feet cavorted and played Katalo, more commonly called Yip, a rat-weasel whose fur was the color of the sky after rain mingled with the green of the sea – Her constant companion, the God of Communication, Thought, Speed, Cleverness, Writing, and Practical Jokes.*

*She was Life, She was Death, She was the bridge between, She was the stars above and the blackness of interstellar space and the awesome fertility that gives birth to universes, and it all began and ended and began again with Her. For him, always, Star would be his personal avatar of the Lady, Whom he*

would worship with hands and mouth and cock and all else that he had to the end of his days. Would Star still be there, waiting for him? Would –

Suddenly, well before he could catch a glimpse of the bay itself, with a sinking heart he saw that the chances that any of those he had loved were still alive, let alone well and in one piece, were vanishingly small. Nearly all the western half of the Bight was clogged and choked with tremendous mudflows streaming northeast from a source far to the west and south, children of the titanic impact in the ocean between North Sandstone and Western Gond the day of the Event.

Far worse, the cliffs and beaches lining the eastern half of the Bight were almost uniformly charcoal-gray, rather than decked out in the brilliant fall colors flaunted by deciduous trees, the oddly beautiful hosts of golden-brown, withering grasses and herbs, and the gorgeous banners of the world-famous pleasure gardens of the great cities lining the Bight. Before the Event, those gardens had been home to flowers and shrubs chosen for the gardens because they could be kept in flower year around, or had carotene-rich leaves that tinted them a sultry dark-red or a flaming crimson regardless of the season. Now they were one with the horror surrounding them, nothing left of them but grey-black mud.

The shores and cliffs lining the Bight were completely covered by those ghastly dirty-gray mudflows, which had solidified in most places to the consistency of rock, suggesting that there had been a great deal of molten rock in the mix from the beginning. Everywhere along the thousands of miles of the long, long irregular arc comprising the Bight, the land had been burned clear down to the bedrock. As for the Bight itself...

Before the Event, the waters of the Bight had been as transparent as glass in clear weather, so that one could look down, down, down to the fantastically beautiful, semi-tropical marine paradise below, filled with multitudes of multicolored reefs, gorgeous polychrome fish ornamented in every color of the rainbow, great marine crocodiles and the occasional enormous mososaur after prey, countless species of crustaceans and squid and ammonites and great clams with rugose shells open wide to catch the endless rains of planktonic life and bounteous carrion of the sea drifting down through the water-column, a cornucopia of abundant life, the Creation amply testifying to the glory of the Gods that had made it. Now, however, those waters were murky and dark, filled with the broken remains of once breathtakingly lovely coral reefs and the clotted remains of the life that had once graced these seas. And here again were drifting dead trees and other plant life, and revenants of artificial structures caught up everywhere in their branches or roots.

At last nearing Broken-Tree Bay, to his horror he saw that its entrance was half-blocked by a long arm flung out by the mudflows that had filled up most of the eastern half of the Bight, extending from the western side of the entrance into the bay out to its midpoint. Assuming the entrance wasn't seriously clogged by detritus of one kind or another and that the mudflows hadn't made the bay dangerously shallow, he'd still be able to get into the bay and, with luck, make it all the way to the docks where he and his family had moored their own private watercraft, just a few hundred yards from their estate. But the condition of the bay's entranceway, which had been kept continuously open and free by constant dredging and care for over a hundred years, even during years haunted by powerful tropical storms, was one more omen of what might lie in store for him when he reached his home – or what was left of it – the ultimate betrayal of all his hopes, begging his worst fears.

From the center of its shoreline to the entranceway from the Bight, Broken-Tree Bay was about 50 miles long,. They had few problems getting into the bay from the Bight – the elements and whatever marine predators still remained in the Bight had pretty much cleared out whatever flotsam had filled up the eastern side of the entrance, past the reaching arms of the mudflows. Likewise, Broken-Tree Bay was essentially open, with few hazards in the form of submerged detritus. What chilled Dawn's heart was how utterly devoid of life the bay seemed, how empty the skies above it were. Everywhere he looked, the dark, murky waters seemed completely lifeless, with not a sign even of the hardier varieties of drifting phytoplankton and sea algae that could be found in even the harshest of marine environments. No birds or pteranodons graced the skies above the bay, even though now, as the launch steadily neared Dawn's home under a strong noontime Sun, those skies were free of clouds and a delicate, pristine blue as if they had just been washed. Not a sign of life was evident anywhere on the shores of the bay. The only sounds were those Yip and he made, the steady sound of the launch's motor, the intermittent slap and mutter of the wavelets that flanked the launch, the gentle wind that sighed across its decks. Nothing else. The place

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*looked and felt as if it were the end of the world, as if Judgment Day had come and gone, the good souls taken up by the Gods to Their Holy Heavens, the rest condemned to this hell on Earth for all eternity.*

*Well before they finally reached their goal, Dawn knew, in his heart of hearts, what he would find when he finally tied up at the private docks of his family's estate and disembarked to find out what had happened to his home.*

*No, it wasn't as nearly bad as Dawn had feared.*

*It was infinitely, mind-shatteringly worse.*

*The docks themselves were completely wrecked, only the blackened stumps of a few shattered timbers reaching up from the water, clawing desperately heavenwards as if begging for mercy from the Gods, left to tell where the docks had been. Steering the launch up to one of those heart-breaking shattered timbers, drooping against a broken pier as if exhausted, Dawn dropped anchor, then tied up to the stump by the simple expedient of lassoing it with a long length of strong hemp rope and snubbing the other end of the rope around the launch's starboard rail.*

*As Dawn put Yip into his jacket pocket, lowered the launch's dinghy over the side, lowered the ship's ladder to allow him to step safely into the dinghy, and climbed down into the little boat, he couldn't keep from staring at what was left of the beautiful estates that had been his permanent home his life long.*

*Not one building, not even an appreciable portion of one, was left standing. It would have been virtually impossible to tell where his family's villa and its outbuildings had once stood if not for what was left of his family's docks, which served as a landmark to fix their location. All that was left of the lovely villa that had been the pride of his family and all its satellite buildings were some low piles of scorched and blackened rubble quickly being eroded away to nothing by the weather. Where once had been vast green lawns and elegant beds of flowers and other ornamental plants was now a wasteland of churned-up, ash-blackened mud. The surrounding hills were covered in black char where they weren't bare down to the bedrock, and the lovely little stream that had flowed past the villa on its way down from those hills to the sea was now a mud-clogged trench, like a slash across the throat of a beautiful woman murdered by a psychopath's knife, her body left to rot for long weeks amid the brush and weeds of a hot Summer. The elegant 50-foot long, marble-tiled swimming pool next to the patio behind the villa had been completely filled in by ash, mud, and wreckage, then covered up with more of the same, with hardly even a depression in the ground to show where it had been. As for the patio itself, not even broken flagstones remained to mark its location. There was no sign of any of the other creatures with which he and his family had shared their estate, none of the delicate-fleshed little dromaeosaurs or big, specially-bred ceratopsians they'd raised for food, nor the swift, bipedal riding and racing carnosaurus they'd used for traveling about their vast land holdings or had entered in the famous Bay Gold races, competing for the much-coveted trophies awarded to winners of those races, nor the modified carnosaurus that had served them as watch-and-guard-beasts. There weren't even the remains of furniture, toys, vehicles, or other personal items. Gone. All gone.*

*As Dawn stood by the long, low, mud-covered mound that was all that remained of the villa, dizzy with horror and loss, feeling all his energy draining away from him, the strength began to run out of his legs. Looking around, he saw nearby a large piece of what had probably been the low stone wall that had bordered some of the flowerbeds near the pool. Warily taking a seat on it, he sat for a while, head in hands, wondering what he was going to do now. Clearly nobody here had survived – or if they had, they must long since have departed, though where they might have gone, and how, he couldn't imagine. Here, so close to the impacts that had hit this continent, it must have been all over within a few minutes, almost no time elapsing between the impacts themselves and the unimaginably violent shockwaves radiating away from them in all directions through atmosphere, land, and sea. He hoped with all his soul that when those shockwaves reached here, they were so devastatingly powerful that they killed everyone and everything living there outright within instants, well before the blazing-hot fallout from the Event reached here, roasting alive whatever life might still remain.*

*Sitting on the mound amidst the ruins of what had been his home, he remembered a song that had been very popular some years before. It had been composed by Chrush m'Urb, a young man living in Laur, the other great northern continent. Bucking all the trends in popular music, the composer/producer/singer had created a portfolio of melodies and songs that ranged from gorgeous parodies of the loud and often obnoxious "stonequake" music then so popular with adolescents the world over, to romantic music that hearkened back to some of the great old masters of classical and operatic*

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*music of two or three centuries before. Many claimed – he among them – that some of the melodies included in that portfolio were so ethereally beautiful that they could have made the Gods Themselves weep. Listening to m’Urb’s music one day as his oldest grandson, his favorite, played it on the big stereo system in the living-room, Dawn thought, with a shiver up his spine, that m’Urb’s music was like that of Ophruoeis, the legendary man with the heavenly voice and skill with the lyre to match who had gone down to the Underworld to beg the Gods of the Dead to return to him his lost, beloved young bride, dead at the hands of a madman on her wedding day.*

*The song had been a posthumous tribute to Princess Ashtar, better known to the world as Princess Star. The beautiful princess, then only in her late thirties, had finally obtained a divorce from her philandering husband, Prince Carlo of the United Kingdom of Lohgres, an island kingdom lying just off the west coast of Laur. She had been married to the bastard for almost twenty years, had borne him two handsome sons, had been deeply beloved by her people and, indeed, by people all over the world (including, if truth be told, Dawn) for her enormous kindness, her vast, generous heart, her enduring fighting spirit, her determination to make the world safe for all children, everywhere. While Dawn had always known that that last was impossible – the Gods hadn’t made the universe such that it could ever come to pass – he had nonetheless loved Princess Star. That name, given to her by her adoring public the world over, was exquisitely apt, for the princess was so very much like his own beloved First Wife of that name, who shared that same fierce dedication to protecting the generations to come by any means possible. Everyone had loved Princess Star – everyone, that is, save her philandering First Husband and the rest of the Royal Family. And then, on the verge of marriage to a wonderful man who truly loved her, Princess Star and her fiancé were involved in a terrible automobile accident that injured him horribly, scarring him for life – and dealt her such hideous injuries that she died of them just a few agonizing hours later.*

*The whole world had mourned Princess Star, establishing memorials everywhere in her memory, creating scholarships and charities and a host of other things that would ensure that her name would be remembered forever with love by the hopeless, the poor, the downtrodden of the world, above all by children everywhere, whom she had fought so long, so hard, to protect and cherish and love. Among the finest tributes to her, at least in Dawn’s opinion, was the song composed and sung by Chrush m’Urb, “There’s a New Star Up in Heaven Tonight” . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

“If that sounds familiar, Hannah,” said Paul, “it’s because it’s very like a real song that had the same title, one that was released somewhere in the 1990s by Chris de Burgh, the same guy who composed and sang ‘The Lady in Red.’ It goes like this,” Paul told me, strumming the opening chords on his guitar, then launching into one of the most beautiful songs I’d ever heard in my life:

The shadows darken and the day is done . . .<sup>31</sup>

Finishing the song and setting his guitar aside, Paul continued Sneaky Rat’s story:

\* \* \* \* \*

*Tears coursing uncontrollably down his cheeks, his whole body racked with sobs that threatened to strangle him, helplessly, hopelessly, Chrush m’Urb’s beautiful song echoing in his mind, his soul, close to driving him mad with grief, Dawn remembered Star as she had been on their last night together, trying not to think of what her last moments must have been like, or the smashed, charred wreckage of what had been her gloriously beautiful body after the fallout from the Event had claimed her life. Only a few months before, that body had been animated by fiery passion, eons-deep love, incandescent fury at all injustice and evil. Now it was no more than a heart-broken memory and remnants of charred meat and shattered bones, recycled by the elements and reduced to their constituent atoms months ago. He sat there upon the low mound that had once been part of the garden wall, wracked with grief, time passing without notice. It seemed an eternity before he finally cried himself out and began to come back to himself again, though, judging by the Sun, it could only have been half an hour or less. As, once more, the here-and-now made*

*itself known to him, he shook himself a little, trying to regather his emotions and his wits, and began taking stock of his situation.*

*. . . Quiet. It was so ungodly quiet here, an outdoor mausoleum in which he was the sole visitant, filled with the deathly hush of a dead world. He was sure, now, that nothing worth salvaging remained here of the civilization that had filled this continent, all its hundreds of millions of people going through their days with such vibrant energy and accomplishment, now all dead. Not even their crushed and shattered and shredded bodies remained to mark their quondam existence and their agonizing passage out of it, nothing more than a few fragments of charred and shattered bone drifting in the mud the storms had left behind. Perhaps in the far north, assuming they'd survived the earthquakes and had had enough warning to evacuate before the rain of fire began to fall, a few fortunate souls might have escaped via boat or plane, but surely none remained alive here. So quiet, such deathly quiet . . .*

## **Chapter 9: A New Star in Heaven Tonight**

*“Eee?”*

*“Yeek!”*

*The source of that high-pitched bark was a suddenly alert and angry Yip, who now jumped down from Dawn's pocket to confront the owner of the first, timid, weak voice, who, bedraggled and half-starved, had suddenly appeared near Dawn's feet. Approaching Dawn and Yip on somewhat wobbly feet, the little mammal, who bore a striking resemblance to Yip, added, “Eh-eh-eh?” – then fell on its side, eyes unfocusing, hands weakly grasping the air.*

*Yip, his anger fled as quickly as it had arisen, was staring in astonishment at the other animal. Slowly he approached it, touched noses with it. “K-k-k-kee?” he asked it in a voice gone soft and gentle.*

*The other creature made a weak, low sound, accompanied by a sigh. A bead of moisture appeared at the corner of one of its eyes, for all the world a tear of exhausted sorrow.*

*“Oh, my Gods,” Dawn breathed reverently. It was one of the pet mammals that his family had kept, Yip's close cousins. In spite of everything, it was still wearing a draggled collar on which could, even now, still be seen Dawn's family colors. Gently Dawn bent down and, scooping the little animal into his hand with exquisite care so as to avoid jostling or alarming it, brought it up close to his face so that he could see it more clearly. A little girl, very young, she probably hadn't had time to conceive her first litter. As far as he could see, she hadn't been neutered, either, but a more thorough inspection would have to wait for later. Right now, more than anything else, judging by her appearance and her shallow, rapid breathing, which bespoke a creature at the end of its resources, she needed clean water and some food.. She was in serious trouble, this little girl, and if she was going to live she needed immediate, top-quality care.*

*Gently setting her back down by his feet, Dawn unclipped the canteen he'd carried here from the launch. While Yip carefully checked the little female over with at least as much care and gentleness as Dawn had employed, Dawn uncapped the canteen and poured a little of the water it contained into the palm of his hand. Then, squatting down, he lowered his hand until it rested on the ground next to the little animal's nose.*

*For a moment Dawn thought she was too far gone now to respond to or get any good out of the water. But suddenly, her whiskers trembling and nose wrinkling in reaction to the scent of the nearby water, she raised her head, opened her eyes, and, extending her neck until her nose touched the water in Dawn's hand, slowly started to lap it up.*

*She was only able to get a teaspoonful or so of the water down before exhaustion overtook her and she had to lie down again. But with his sense of aura he'd acquired during his long years in combat-arts training and on active military duty, Dawn saw that the energy was no longer draining out of her wasted little body. She could hold on a little longer, now, maybe long enough to get down the water and food she so desperately needed and begin the long, slow journey back from the edge of the Valley of the Shadow to life and health once more.*

*“Ptee!” came another weak voice. Already alerted by the discovery of the little female rat-weasel, Dawn instantly recognized the source of that voice: a crevice in the ground between two rocks a few feet*



*away from him, out from which poked the nose of another of Yip's kin. There had to be a colony of the little creatures down there!*

*Sure enough, soon six more rat-weasels emerged from their underground shelter and lay huddled by Dawn's feet. While Yip moved slowly among them, without even a hint of his initial instinctual hostility toward the stranger, only pity and grief clear in his expression and stance, touching noses with them, making encouraging little sounds to them, one after another Dawn dispensed water to them in his cupped hand. However had the little creatures managed to survive down there in that hole in the ground for all the last few months? Obviously there had to have been some water dripping down from above which they could drink, and some worms and other creatures of the soil for them to eat – but judging from their general condition, the fare down there had been poor and poorer. A few more days more and the water and food and their luck would have run out – that anything had remained down there at all after the way the Event had cauterized, flooded, and buried the land was miracle enough in itself. Oh, yes, the Lady had been watching over them, calling Dawn to come and save them . . .*

*“You know, I think we've even got some food for them with us, Yip,” Dawn told his companion. “I made up some sandwiches last night and put them in a bag in the refrigerator to take with us when we made landfall. I brought the bag with us when we came out here this afternoon. There's plenty of meat in there, and lots of oil in the spread I put on the thickbread to flavor them. Think they might like it?” Dawn asked Yip, holding out a sandwich for Yip's inspection.*

*Yip took an experimental bite from the sandwich. “Yeek!” he told Dawn, clearly approving of the fare. Chuckling, Dawn divided the sandwich into tiny bits, which he then began to feed to the rat-weasels lying near his feet, weak with exhaustion.*

*Three of the rat-weasels wolfed the food down with relish – Dawn wouldn't have to worry about them. All three of them had guzzled down the water he'd offered them so quickly he'd had to restrain them, to make sure they didn't drink too much at once and get sick. They'd recover quickly, with few problems save, perhaps, for limps and, in one case, the loss of a hind leg which, judging from the formation of scar-tissue that had followed, must have occurred at the time of the Event or not long after.*

*Another trio of the mammals, including the little girl who'd been the first to emerge from the crevice, would probably do all right, as well, though they'd take a good deal longer to recover, and he'd have to disinfect their many wounds and maybe set a few bones. Though at first their response to the proffered food and water was minimal, they soon came around enough to realize the nature of what Dawn was offering them, and make increasingly strong attempts to get as much of it as they could.*

*The last one, though – it was a little boy, smaller and probably younger than the rest, and he was in critical condition. He'd been badly burned, and the burns hadn't healed well. He had broken ribs, and the bones in one of his hands had been shattered and badly healed. Even given to him a drop at a time, the water didn't go down easily for him, and wasn't doing any good Dawn could see, while the animal showed no interest at all when he was offered a piece of sandwich meat covered in dressing.*

*Dawn had almost decided that the kindest thing he could do for the poor little fellow was quickly put him out of his misery when Yip, almost as if he were reading Dawn's mind, placed himself between the dying animal and Dawn, looking imploringly up at the man as if to say, “Don't kill him!”*

*A shiver going down his back – after all, these were animals sacred to his Goddess, however much he tended to forget that most of the time, thanks to their zany antics and their many amusing little tricks – Dawn asked Yip, “You want me to try to save him?”*

*“Yeek!” cried Yip, now protectively straddling the other animal's body. As plain as if Yip had said it aloud came the thought: “I love you, Daddy, and I don't want to defy you for anything in the world, but if you try to hurt him, I'll have to fight you.”*

*Moved beyond words, beyond tears, Dawn told Yip, “All right, Yip, I'll do everything possible to save him. You'll have to watch over him for me until he gets some of his strength back, though, and let me know when he's having trouble, so I can do what he needs right away. Can you do that?”*

*“Yeek!” Yip told him. Again, almost as if he'd spoken the words, came the thought: “My Daddy can do anything! I know you can save him! I know it!”*

*“Okay, Yip, we'll take him back to the boat with the others, and do everything we can for all of them, him included,” Dawn told Yip, as, bending down, he began scooping up the sick animals and putting them in his pockets for the walk back to the boat, reserving his most capacious pocket for the little boy whom*

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*Yip had been guarding, to make sure the animal wasn't too stressed by confining cloth. "Are there any more down there in that hole, do you think? Could you go look for me, see if there are more?"*

*Somehow Yip understood that, too. Crying "Yeek! Yeek!" he made for the crevice from which the animals had appeared and dived into it. A few minutes later he emerged, wearing a very long face.*

*"Did you find any more down there, Yip?"*

*The muttering, head shake, and long sigh Yip gave him in answer told Dawn clearly that yes, there'd been more down there – and they were all dead. Yip showed no inclination to jump back down that hole for any survivors, which, given his protectiveness toward the sickest of the rat-weasels that had already come forth from that black underground tomb, he'd surely have done if any had been left alive down there. Yip's evident unhappiness was very different than the "no problem" sort of expression he wore when nothing of interest was left in a place he'd just checked out. There were bodies down there, all right – but nothing animated them now save for death-beetles and grave-worms.*

*"Oh, Lady, Yip, we'd best get back to the boat with these poor little people and make them as comfortable as we can," Dawn told Yip. Rising to his feet and putting Yip into one of his pockets, he sighed in grief as he looked around the barren waste that was all that was left of his home and family. Then, turning his face resolutely toward the harbor, Dawn, heart-heavy with grief, began to make his way back to the launch.*

*It wasn't long until they were back aboard the launch and Dawn was able to find a place to lay out his seven little patients so that he could begin work on them, dressing their wounds, setting bones, setting up fluid drips for those still too weak to take water and nourishment in a normal fashion. In the big, well-stocked military first-aid locker with which the launch had been provided by the Navy, he found everything he needed: materials for bandages, cortisone and antiseptic ointments, antibiotics, antiseptic soaps and solutions, splints, sutures and surgical needles, support bandages, surgical shears, and IV setups. Taking out what he thought he'd need and laying it down on a long metal counter-top that he first scrubbed down with antiseptic soap, Dawn went over to the large, soft cushions on which he'd laid the little mammals, trying to decide which one to start working on.*

*As he'd seen back on land, three of the animals would recover nicely on their own. He'd need to check them over in more detail, of course, and, as he would have to do for all of them, he'd have to make sure they were free of parasites and that sort of thing. But for now those three were going to do fine.*

*The next three, the ones who had perked up enough to start taking nourishment without too much fuss, could also be left for a little while. They weren't in good shape, but none of them seemed to be in much pain, and all three were breathing normally, their eyes clear and their noses twitching inquisitively at the unfamiliar odors of the launch.*

*It was the seventh mammal, the tiny little male, who needed care immediately if he was to survive. Somehow he'd lived through the journey to the launch in Dawn's pocket, but Dawn didn't give him long odds of making it through the night. He'd do what he could for the poor creature, and make him as comfortable as possible as quickly as he could, while still giving the little animal quality care, then work on the rest.*

*While checking over the poor little boy, Dawn found that he had several broken ribs, but none of them threatened any of the mammal's internal organs. The little mammal's left hand had been completely crushed, but it had more or less healed up. An amputation wasn't indicated, at least for now, for which Dawn was heartily glad – such invasive surgery right now would be almost certain to kill the animal, whose poor little body was almost completely drained of resources and hadn't the strength to endure such an insult without collapsing completely. There were the badly-healed burns, though they could be cleaned out and dressed without, Dawn hoped, putting too much stress on the animal.*

*And there were the fleas. All of the little beasts had fleas, and the Gods alone knew what else, besides, but underneath what was left of his fur, this little guy was almost black with the pests. So the first thing that Dawn did for him was gently wash him down with an antiseptic soap that would not only help prevent infection, but was guaranteed to send the fleas running for cover from the soap's astringent smell, and ultimately poison and drown those who didn't manage to leave their furry little sinking ship. He had to dab the soap on gently with a cloth, and then, just as gently, dab water onto the soaped areas to dilute and rinse the soap away again. For this, he got out a piece of rubber sheeting and laid it on the cushion, gently lifted the little male onto it, and went to work, cleaning the animal's body and chasing the fleas away at the same time.*

*During this operation the little animal opened its eyes, looked intently at him, and uttered a “Cheee!” in a hoarse, weak voice.*

“Yes,” Dawn told him, “this will make you feel better.”

“Chee?”

“I promise. Now lie still while I put this bandage around you to hold those ribs in place . . .”

*From time to time, as the man worked on him, the animal whimpered a little, but never quite cried out. Clearly he was a brave little thing, and understood that the man was working hard to help him, and so was doing what he could to cooperate. “Brave little soldier, we’ll set you to rights, you’ll see,” Dawn told him soothingly. Then: “You’ve still got a collar on, don’t you? That can’t be very comfortable. Let me get that thing off you and we’ll see if you have any problems on your neck . . .”*

*Moments later, staring at the remains of the collar, which he’d just cut away with surgical shears, dangling from his hand, Dawn found it was all he could do not to break down completely. There was a tag attached to the collar, and on it was the name of the animal, “Bee,” it said, and on the next two lines it gave the address and phone number of his family’s estate – and the name ‘Star.’ Oh, Lady, this had been his Star’s very own little boy, all that was left of her . . .*

*His eyes burning with tears, Dawn had to fight with all his strength to keep his equilibrium. Carefully laying the collar down on a workbench and turning back to Bee, just to keep his mind from straying back to thoughts he dared not think right now, he continued checking the animal over to see what else needed tending to. Finally satisfied that the worst problems had been diagnosed and dealt with as well as he could manage, he set up an IV drip for Bee, telling him, “I hope you can understand me – you’ve got to lie still here for a while, while we get some fluid into you. I know that needle there in your arm isn’t pleasant, but by morning you should be feeling a lot better. I also want to give you an injection of something to make you sleepy, so it won’t hurt as much, okay?”*

“Chee-bee,” said Bee in a weak voice.

*Suddenly, with a rustling noise, Yip was on the cushion next to Bee. Before the man could say anything, Yip was lying down next to Bee, his good arm laid across the other animal’s body. As Yip looked imploringly up at Dawn, the man asked him, touched to the heart, “You want to stay with him tonight, Yip?”*

“Dee-yip!”

“Okay, that’s fine. He’ll probably be better for the company. Tomorrow I’ll have to give all eight of you a bath, and spray this boat down to get rid of all those fleas, but for now it’ll be okay. Now I’m going to give Bee a shot of something, so don’t get upset by the injection, okay?”

*So saying, Dawn picked up a small bottle and a disposable syringe from the things he’d laid out on the countertop. Drawing some of the fluid from the bottle into the syringe through the bottle’s rubber-covered cap, he quickly injected a little of it into the scruff of Bee’s neck. Bee, now completely exhausted, only twitched slightly as the needle went in, then promptly slid into unconsciousness.*

“Now, you realize Bee might not make it through the night, don’t you, Yip?” Dawn asked Yip.

“Chee-chee!”

“I know, but it’s in the hands of the Gods now. I’ll do everything I can for him, though. You come wake me up if he needs anything, okay?” he told Yip. Yip always listened intently to everything Dawn said, and seemed to get the idea whenever Dawn tried to get something important across to him.

*And Yip did seem to understand. “Yeek!” he told Dawn. Suddenly leaping from the table to Dawn’s shoulder, he kissed Dawn’s face a dozen or more times with quick, ardent swipes of his pink little tongue. Then, turning and jumping back down onto the table next to Bee, Yip began gently nuzzling the back of Bee’s neck, the sort of thing females of their species did to comfort their infants.*

*Not really believing that Bee was going to make it – he’d been too badly injured, had had too little food and clean water over too long a period of time for his tiny body to cope – with a sigh Dawn turned to the other animals and began to check them over. These were in no danger, even the three who, at first, had seemed to be so badly off, so for now he confined his efforts to washing them down, cleaning and dressing wounds, and doing whatever other damage control was indicated. Then, setting up bowls of food and water for them next to the cushions on which they lay, and putting a box filled with litter for them a little farther away, on the same level, Dawn, his hands shaking, retreated to a nearby chair and fell into it. His legs felt so very weak and strange, his vision was doing such strange things – or was it just the tears in his eyes that made everything seem so blurred and distorted?*

*Every one of the little animals had been wearing a collar. And on every one of the scorched, tattered collars there had been a battered, mud-streaked tag listing the animal's name, the address and telephone number of Dawn's family's estate, and the name of one or another of Dawn's grandchildren, nephews, nieces, or, in one case, his second eldest daughter, Liama, the one he'd had with Heavenly-Perfume-of-Night-Blooming-Spring-Flowers (or, simply, "Flower,") who'd doted on the little animals and had always had at least one as a pet.*

*Above all, there was Bee, poor little Bee, who had been Star's own pet – and now, yes, he remembered tiny Bee, who, when Dawn had last seen him, a day or two before leaving his home on his business trip for what had proved to be the last time, had been no more than a furry little bundle of mischievous preadolescent rat-weasel, rooting for a drink of milk from his mama's teats, competing gamely against several brothers and sisters for his mother's attentions as well as for her milk. Star, who, if truth be told, had had an even softer spot in her heart for the feisty little animals than even Liama had ever had, had picked Bee out for her own a couple of days after Bee's birth, a moon-cycle and a half before then. She must have put that collar on Bee a day or two after Dawn had taken off for his trip, just days before the whole world blew up in her face and she and everything and everyone she had loved perished horribly – save for Dawn and Bee and these other little ones.*

*“. . . And I only am escaped to tell thee . . .” Remembering that line from the story of that poor schlimazel Enverfolger in The Book of the Lady of Battles, the devout worshipper of the Lady who had been tormented day and night for seven years by the Gods of Evil because of a bar-bet made between Her and the Evil Gods, then finally rescued by Her after the term of the bet had expired, a shiver went up Dawn's back. He hoped to Her that unlike that schmuck Enverfolger, he wasn't a whining ninny who just took it and took it and took it and never stood up on his hind legs to demand an accounting from Her, Who loved those who respected themselves and detested those who never tried to defend themselves from the evils that befell them, whether Heaven permitted those evils or not. And then his thoughts returned again to the seven little people whom he and Yip had rescued . . .*

*They were all that were left of his family, little living vessels filled with the love and devotion of his own loved ones, all the posterity Dawn's family would have beyond Dawn's own memories. Doubtless down there, in the hole these seven refugees from the fiery storms that had engulfed so much of the planet in the wake of the Event had found to shelter them, emerging from it only when Dawn had come out there with Yip to see what was left of the estate, there were the bodies of many more rat-weasels. His family had always had a great love for these creatures, every member of the family save the very youngest having one or more of them as his or her personal companions and friends.*

*All his family was gone, devoured by the fiery fangs of the Event – and yet, in these little animals, their spirits still persisted. Not all was gone, not all was lost. Any idea of throwing in the towel now, letting go of life and taking a well-deserved rest, joining his family in the Long Dark, was gone. Dawn had to live, if not for his own sake, then for these little people, the sole remaining heirs of his family and, perhaps, his entire species. Why else would the Gods have brought him here just in time to find these little animals before they all died, with the resources to give them the medical help they'd need to survive?*

*And there was one other thing that struck him: not one of the animals had been neutered. Though all of them save Bee were old enough to have been weaned for some months before the Event, and could therefore have been safely neutered, for whatever reason not one of them had been fixed. They could have offspring! – assuming, that is, that they lived long enough to do so. And Yip was likewise a complete animal. Any of the females here could be suitable mates for him, and he didn't seem to have any animosity toward the males, only the same desperate protectiveness he exhibited toward the females, especially in Bee's case.*

*Oh, Gods, they had to live! If anything of Dawn's own species was to live, it would have to do so through these little creatures, the beloved companions of his family, and above all, of Star. And he'd have to take them away from here – clearly there was nothing left here for them. How they'd managed to find enough to eat over the last couple of months or so he didn't even want to speculate – maybe there'd been enough insects and worms there in the soil surrounding their hideaway to keep them going, but as toxic as the soil must have become in the Event's aftermath, and as badly disturbed as it must have been by the quakes and the storms that had followed, it would have been hard going even for the bugs and worms, especially after the carcasses of larger life-forms left in the Event's wake had been reduced by the weather and the action of necrotrophs to inedible fragments of bone and scales and feathers. By the time he found*

*them, the only food left for them down there would probably have been the slowly rotting bodies of those among the little colony of survivors who hadn't made it.*

*Thank the Gods Dawn had heard that broadcast from Eastern Gond! There was the real possibility of refuge there, not only for himself but also for Yip and the others, as well. It wasn't their native land – Yip's species was native to North Sandstone – but if what he knew about the southern continent was true, the more southerly parts of Eastern Gond were in a temperate zone, and included regions where the vegetation and general conditions were much like those in the places where Yip's tribe had originated.*

*That decided, now exhausted and emotionally wrung out from everything that had happened today, Dawn stumbled off to bed, barely managing to get his clothes off before falling into his bunk. Though by now he desperately needed a shower, he decided to put it off until he'd gotten some rest. For now, he needed the oblivion and healing of sleep. Tomorrow, with all its sorrows and cares, would have to wait until tomorrow.*

*So musing, Dawn slipped down into a black well of exhausted sleep. He thought when he got into bed he'd sleep around the clock, but sometime during the night he came bolt awake to find Yip frantically licking his face, trying to wake him up. "Hey, what's going on, fella?"*

## **Chapter 10: Resurrection**

Uttering a sharp cry, Yip jumped down from the man's bunk and raced back toward the galley, where the mammals they'd rescued were laid out on the cushions. Pulling on his trousers and slipping his feet into a pair of plastic sandals, Dawn stumbled into the galley, where he'd left the light on just in case, to find Yip standing on Bee's cushion, next to the little male.

*"Oh, Gods," Dawn groaned, thinking that Bee had died in the night. Whatever would be going through Yip's mind now? How in the world could he manage to comfort him?*

*But to his vast surprise Dawn found that Bee, rather than lying there cold and contorted in death, was on the contrary sitting proudly couchant on his cushion, eagerly looking about the cabin and making the little chattering noises that his species made to indicate interest and excitement. Beside him on the cushion the IV needle lay loose; apparently it had fallen out or been pulled loose as the animal slept. Yip was standing right over the needle, excitedly calling to Dawn to fix the problem!*

*Chuckling, Dawn told him, picking up the IV unit and putting it over on the sterilized countertop with the other equipment, "Looks as if Bee can eat and take fluid on his own now, Yip. He won't need that. So we can leave it aside. It can't be very comfortable for the poor little man. Let's see what he can do with some real food and fluid, okay?"*

*"Chee?"*

*"That's right, I'm going to give him some water, and puree some of that sandwich meat for him, see if he can eat that mixed with a little oil."*

*"Yeek!" Yip told him approvingly, then, turning back to Bee, began to wash the place on Bee's arm where the needle had pulled loose, leaving a few spots of blood on Bee's fur and skin.*

*Soon Bee was eagerly lapping up water from a spoon Dawn held up for him, then wolfing down little bits of meat dipped in plant oil with heartening gusto. "He's gonna make it, Yip," the man told his friend. "He really is."*

*By now all the other mammals were awake and insisting on getting some goodies themselves. Laughing joyously over the obvious improvement in Bee and the other mammals, Dawn made sure the food and water dishes he'd laid out for all of them contained plenty of food and clear water, then set out Yip's own dishes on the table and filled them, too. Some of the little animals looked as if they needed to empty their bladders or colons, and Dawn gently placed them in the big litter box, helping them back to bed after they'd done their business. "I'm gonna have to set out a bunch of these things for all of you," he told them. "As fussy as you people generally are about how clean your bathroom is, I'd better make sure the facilities are up to snuff for you."*

*Though still sleepy and tired, Dawn no longer felt that leaden lassitude that had hit him just before he'd gotten into bed a few hours before. The world seemed far brighter than it had then, and life seemed worth living.*

*They were going to have to leave for Eastern Gond soon, before the worst of the autumnal storms began to hit North Sandstone. There were more islands on the way where they would probably be able to refuel and refit and repair anything that needed it, but if they were going to make it all the way to Eastern Gond, they'd better leave within the next couple of days. The meteorological aftereffects of the Event had dampened down considerably since the Event itself, but with Winter coming on here in the Northern Hemisphere, monster storms would soon bear down on North Sandstone. Coupled with the freezing temperatures Winter was likely to bring, those storms would be killing-hard, even for those on board the launch, if they stayed here. The hydrogen-cell batteries were large, but not inexhaustible, and if they didn't recharge them or find new ones soon, they'd run out of power for heating, cooking, and everything else somewhere around the Winter Solstice, the first of Winter's hardest days.*

*Rather than returning to bed, Dawn spent what was left of the night and the day that followed fixing up more permanent quarters for his little passengers, making sure that they'd be as stable as possible, so that the mammals wouldn't be likely to be tipped out of bed onto the floor below if the weather at sea got rough, as it surely would at some point. With the aid of a dolly he'd found in one of the launch's lockers, Dawn carried aboard a good hundred gallons of sand from the few stretches of beach along Broken-Tree Bay that had eluded the great mudflows in bags and buckets. Dousing it all down with a strong solution of chlorine bleach and some insecticide he'd found in another locker, Dawn left the sand stowed in the hold to dry out, so that he could use it for litter for the mammals' potty-boxes, which he rigged up for them from various containers and boxes he found aboard the launch.*

*A couple of days later, the only things left from his homeland that he cared about now aboard the launch with him, Dawn cast off from the wrecked pier and began the journey out of Broken-Tree Bay and the Bight of Summer Winds without a backward glance. A couple of days later, they were well out to sea, heading southeast, bound for Eastern Gond.*

*The journey to the southern continent wasn't nearly as hard or eventful as the one to North Sandstone from Hunter's Paradise had been. There were some storms, but they were strikingly mild in comparison to the monster monsoons that had blasted across the face of the Atlantic Ocean as he'd made his way west to his homeland, and they grew milder still as the launch reached the equator, crossed it, and continued on southward, where Spring was well underway and Summer was coming on. Here in these southern seas he found increasingly abundant life, both plant and animal. There were even some mososaurs and other large marine reptiles hunting these southern oceans – in fact, one of them, approaching the launch with a speculative gleam in its cold eyes, gave him a bit of a scare for a while until, apparently deciding the launch contained nothing it wanted, but wasn't an enemy, either, the giant marine animal turned and made off toward an island they were passing to leeward.*

*Even so, a great many species with which these waters had formerly swarmed weren't in evidence at all, while others, in contrast to their former abundance, were so thinned out that, very clearly, they were in real trouble. Ammonites seemed to have disappeared completely. Of the great marine reptiles such as the mososaurs and marine crocodiles, he only saw a very few, like that one that had been eyeing the launch. He wasn't that surprised – the main breeding-grounds of many of those animals had been located mostly in northern waters, and it was during the northern Summer, when so many of them either took mates or produced young conceived the previous year, that the Event had taken place.*

*Worse, a vast surge of volcanism in the giant island continent south of Siberus that had been triggered by shockwaves from the big bolide that had impacted between North and South America, converging at the impact site's antipodes, continued to fill the air in the northern hemisphere with megatons upon megatons of sulfur and sulfur dioxide. Combining with water-vapor from the same cause, the supersaturated atmosphere dumped its brimstone-laden cargo everywhere in the form of caustic acidic rains; runoff from the rain made its way to the northern oceans, enormous shallow pools of which accumulated all along the shorelines and spread way out to sea. These garishly yellow-orange acidic slicks interacted with the seawater on which they lay, producing low-lying, heavy clouds of mustard gas and other toxic chemicals extending from the coasts of southern Laur, Siberus, and North Sandstone well out past littoral, reef-filled waters, killing everything that came near the surface of the water. The once-beautiful reefs, swarming with vibrant life, had quickly turned to bleached-out skeletons that were home now only to the rotting carcasses of fish and other marine life that had depended on the bounty of those reefs for their survival.*

*But the damage hadn't stopped there. The great marine reptiles – the mososaurs, crocodilians, giant monitor lizards, marine turtles, and all their ocean-going kin – could escape the death-traps which the reef communities had become by simply swimming out to deep waters. But to reproduce, the females had to come back to the reef communities where they themselves had first seen the light of day. The food needed by pregnant females and their newborns was there, and the reefs provided a wealth of hideaways and crannies into which the babies could retreat when menaced by sharks or adult reptiles. The open ocean was no place to give birth. The hazards out there, far from shore, were overwhelming, and resources were too scattered there. They had to come to the reefs to give birth – but if they did, whenever they came to the surface to breathe – unlike fish, they had no gills and had to come up to the surface to breathe the air – they found themselves trying to breathe a witch's-brew of compounds of sulfur and chlorine that could kill in seconds. In order to survive, they had to remain out in the open ocean – a death-sentence for those species whose reef nurseries were located in northern waters.*

*It was likely that in many cases, the primary consequences of the Event had already reduced numerous marine life-forms to numbers so low that that alone had doomed them. But even in cases in which large populations of a given species had escaped the immediate consequences of the Event, they still faced extinction, for they could not reproduce. The survival of an adult member of a species meant nothing if it could not bring forth young. If the sulfur-laden rains lasted much longer – and, from what he'd gleaned from the broadcast he'd picked up from Eastern Gond, there was no indication that they'd stop any time soon – numerous families, orders, and even whole classes of marine animals would become extinct. All it would take was another fifty years or so, until the last fertile members of so many lineages were gone, and their lineages with them.*

*In some cases, it was the main sources of food for many marine animals that the Event must have done for, destroying access to numerous reservoirs of the rich bottom sediments on which plankton, the foundation of the marine food web, depended for nourishment. With their sources of food – or the food upon which their preferred prey depended – gone, many marine species were very likely to die out completely within a few years.*

*Another source of attrition, of course, would be epidemic disease in the form of strange microbes brought into the southern regions by birds and pteranodons fleeing the fire of the north for the presumed safety of the south. Flying beasts which normally migrated each year only between the Arctic Circle and the northern Tropics or, at the most southerly point, the Equator, would have fled for their lives as far south as they could go, past the equator and on to Eastern Gond, or to Transantarctica, the long southern landmass which had just begun to rift into two continents – though the rift wasn't yet complete, the scientists had already begun calling the two continent-to-be Northern Austral and Southern Austral.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, they would of course carry freightloads of death in the form of viruses and bacteria to which the southern fauna, which up until then had suffered relatively little immediate attrition in the wake of the Event and its aftermath, weren't accustomed. Predators such as the dromaeosaurs and carnosaurus native to Eastern Gond would find many of those invaders, worn out and suffering for lack of sufficient nourishing food along the way south, easy pickings when the refugees finally came to land – and then would perish miserably from the ravages of microbes carried by their hapless prey.*

*Only a few species of turtles, monitor lizards, and other marine reptiles had their breeding grounds far enough south, and were out of range of the primary effects of the Event, to escape the fate of most of their kin. The world they inherited would be a lonely one – the world was definitely in for another Great Dying such as those that had closed the Triassic and Jurassic, though perhaps not nearly as bad as the one that had put a close to the Permian, which, then as now, stood at number one among all the extinction events of the living Earth's tortured, impact-wracked history. The Lady of Battles taught that the history of Life was the history of its great extinction events and the great radiations that had followed them all. Maybe the Event was something that had to be, and had been brought about by the will of the Lady – the Gods of Life had to be ruthless in Their love of the creatures of which they were guardians, weeding and pruning as much as seeding and nurturing, in order that Life itself might endure. But oh, it was hard, so hard! When all your world had died, would you still live on, come what may, enduring until the very end? For many species, the answer to that would be a sorrowing "No." But maybe, just maybe, Dawn hoped, he could preserve a little bit of what had been in the form of Yip and his cousins, give them a fighting chance to make it in the world that would replace the one he'd known, now lost for all time.*

*Maybe he could give them a future – and by all the Gods, he was going to try with everything he had to do just that.*

*About three months after they left North Sandstone, Dawn and his precious supercargo of life finally reached the southwestern shores of Eastern Gond. Avoiding the mountainous island continent that lay further north, separated from the larger continent by a shallow sea,<sup>33</sup> they made their way down the long, narrow strip of ocean that lay between Eastern Gond and the island continent, finally putting in at a port about 13 degrees south of the equator, located in what would someday be the interior of Angola – for as the ages went by, the engines of plate tectonics and meteorological dynamics would drain those shallow seas and raise the land until that island continent was one with Eastern Gond's mainland and the lands which, in Dawn's time, had been continental shelves, covered by many fathoms of water, would stand high and dry above the Atlantic Ocean, part of the giant continent of Africa.*

*Their final destination was Sundown City, the site of the university from whence the broadcast he'd picked up months before had originated. Hoping against hope that some of his own people had survived the disaster there, after tying up to a dock in the Sundown City harbor, leaving the mammals behind for the time being, with Yip to watch over them, Dawn disembarked and walked a little ways into the city, to see what might be happening there.*

*He was depressed but not really surprised to find that Sundown City was a ghost town, though one in far better shape than Ororet's Dream, the island where he'd put in after leaving Hunter's Paradise to refit and restock and had found that short-wave radio – and never mind the east coast of North Sandstone, where his home had been located. There were few bodies of men and women in evidence. Those last survivors had had time to bury most of their dead before succumbing to the plagues which, judging from the diaries he found among the papers and other effects of the professors in their offices at the deserted university, had spelled their doom. If more of their food-crops had made it through the weird weather that had followed the Event, or if a sufficient number of them had had the experience and savvy to fall back on the skills of their ancestors and become successful hunters, fishers, and gatherers, a number of them might well have made it. But when food ran short, and their distilleries broke down and could no longer provide safe, clean water for them, and none of those still living had the know-how to do the necessary repairs, that was the end; their bodies, weakened by hunger, were no longer able to beat down the swarms of microbes that invaded them via the water they drank and washed in, the few birds and other animals they were able to catch for food, the soil in which they tried to grub for nutritious roots, and the very air they breathed. Most of their doctors had died within a couple of months after the Event as a result of everything from pestilence to trampling, goring, or other death by misadventure in unfortunate encounters with large, panicky animals fleeing Eastern Gond's northern regions, which had suffered greatly from the consequences of the Event, for the presumed safety of the south. The remaining physicians had survived only by the luck of the draw, and their luck ran out with that of the others who had survived beyond those first chaotic months as new epidemic diseases, starvation, and large wild predators came along to finish the job.*

*The last one to die was a young woman who had been a junior professor of economics. After burying her two friends, young men who had also been members of the university's faculty – her husbands, co-wives, and children had been among the first to die, and she had had plenty of help in burying them, before the epidemics began cutting all the survivors down like grass under the sharp blade of a mower – she went to her office, wrote out the events of the day and her last thoughts in her diary, then went down to the beautiful gardens which, though overgrown and neglected now, still graced the university's central courtyard. There she injected herself with an overdose of a narcotic drug, then lay down on a bench to die. It was there, after first running across the woman's office and her open diary, which made it clear what she was about to do, that Dawn found what remained of her body, now little more than a few disarticulated bones wrapped in the tatters of what must once have been a very attractive dress.*

*Filled with sorrow and desolation, Dawn slowly walked back to the launch. He wouldn't have any trouble providing for himself or his eight little charges here – the Marines had trained him in every sort of survival skill, including how to live off the land, and among the great joys of his childhood, his extensive hunting and fishing trips with his father, co-fathers, older brothers, and uncles had been among his most precious memories. But ah, Gods, it was going to be lonely, so lonely . . .*



*When he stepped aboard the launch once more, he was greeted by an extremely excited Yip. “Chee! Yee-yeek!” the mammal told him urgently, running up to the man and gripping his legs with one hand and the stump of his other arm.*

*“What is it, Yip, hunh? What do you want me to do?” he asked the mammal, bending down to stroke Yip’s fur.*

*With a flick of his tail and a sharp cry of “Yee-yee-yee!” Yip spun about and raced for the stairs down to the cabins below. Pausing at the top of the stairs, he turned to look imploringly at Dawn.*

*“Okay, son, I’m coming, hold on.” Forgetting his black mood in the face of Yip’s great excitement – something very important must have happened below – Dawn quickly followed Yip down the stairs and through the launch to the spare cabin at the back, which he’d rigged up as a combination sleeping compartment and playroom for the mammals.*

## **Chapter 11: Nativity**

Entering the door of the cabin one step behind Yip, he stopped dead in the doorway, thunderstruck, at the sight that greeted them there. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said softly, staring down at the female mammal who lay sprawled out on the rug that covered the center of the cabin’s floor, exhausted but proud and triumphant, nursing six tiny infants. “My Gods – I didn’t even notice you were pregnant!” he told her apologetically as he kneeled down next to her to look more closely at her and her new offspring. “Aren’t they something!” he told her, his voice reverent. He reached out his hand to touch one of them. Their mother, whose name was Kiya, “Bright Little Summer Flower,” gave him a hot look of warning – then, realizing he meant no harm, relented and let him caress the top of the baby’s head with one finger for a moment.

“Bee!” cried Yip, who was sitting on the rug nearby.

“Bee? What about Bee?” Dawn asked him.

“Bee!!” Yip cried in fond exasperation. He was grinning.

Dawn looked around. Sure enough, there was Bee, sitting on the rug on the female’s other side, looking wonderingly at Kiya and her litter.

Each of the little mammals could easily be distinguished in some way from the others, due to its markings or size or, sadly, wounds from the Event. In Bee’s case, not only was he the smallest of the males, and the one who had been hurt worst, and now bearing the most scars, but he was also one of the rarer breeds among Yip’s species, a lilac-point, with a gray-blue mask, mauve ears, gray-blue socks and boots and tail, and cream-colored fur everywhere else. Kiya, on the other hand, was a little blond, covered all over with golden fur. And every one of her babies had Bee’s lilac-point markings on the golden background that came from Kiya’s genes.

“Well, I’ll be damned – Bee’s a daddy now, isn’t he?” Dawn said to Yip, the note of wonder in his tone matching that in Bee’s expression.

“Bee-eee-eee!” Yip cried happily, dancing all around his two friends and their new babies.

“Lady – I never noticed she was pregnant!” Dawn muttered to himself as he rose to his feet. His eyes narrowed as a sudden thought occurred to him. “Are any of the others pregnant?” Four of the rat-weasels they’d rescued back in North Sandstone had been females. Though they’d all been young animals when he’d found them there, they were certainly old enough to conceive litters by now. Taking up the other three females one by one, he carefully examined them.

Not only were they all pregnant, but now that he was looking at them closely, it was clear that all three were close to term. Within a week, at most, they would give birth to 4-8 babies apiece.

“Oh, my dear Gods,” he said softly. “How was all this going on, and I missed it all?” True enough, he’d had his hands more than full navigating, keeping the launch trim and clean, making sure his charges were eating well and had plenty of clean water, checking their healing wounds and broken bones, changing bandages and dressings as appropriate, and otherwise tending to them. But how had he missed the obvious?

Sure, he’d seen them engaged in sex-play, but hadn’t thought anything of it. That was normal for this species, whether the animals were complete or neutered. And, at any rate, there had been a host of other

matters that had occupied his mind so completely that he'd never drawn the obvious conclusion: that soon, at most within a couple of months, given that they were fertile, the four females would all be giving birth.

On the other hand, as far as missing the signs of pregnancy in the four females, that wasn't all that hard to do. These little girls were still quite young (on average their kind lived for 9-14 years, depending on various factors; females went through puberty at about six months of age, and males at about 10 months), and were still recovering from a long period of malnutrition and near-starvation. He must have mistaken their slowly expanding girth for normal filling-out due to their finally getting enough good food, care, and rest.

Now he remembered that each time he'd picked up one of the females to examine her, one of the males had edged over, regarding him watchfully throughout Dawn's examination of the female rat-weasel. There were four mated pairs of rat-weasels here! Every female rat-weasel was guarded by exactly one male of her kind – Yip, he noticed now, was staring intently at him as he held and examined another of the females, Para, "Flight of Butterflies," a lovely little mammal with a light tan body and sable mask, ears, boots, and tail. "Is this your lady, Yip?" Dawn asked Yip, smiling a little.

"Yeek!" Yip barked, looking anxious – he seemed torn between love of his Daddy and concern for the well-being of his wife, now being turned over and over in Daddy's big hands.

"Well, don't worry, I'm not going to hurt her. Just want to see if she's pregnant – as I'm sure you've been aware for some time, she is – and make sure she's all right. Which she seems to be, so I'll put her back down here," he said, placing the little female back on the rug. Immediately Yip rushed over to touch noses with her, sniff her all over, and begin grooming her, while Dawn smiled down on them affectionately, suddenly feeling years younger and far less burdened by worry.

That was one load off his mind. Obviously his little colony of mammals was viable, at least as far as ability to produce offspring went. If the pair-bonding he'd seen now was evidence, not only were all four females fertile, but all four of the males were able to sire offspring. Eight genotypes – that wasn't a whole hell of a lot of variety as far as a gene-pool went, but it was a lot better than, say, one male and two females or something even worse, which he'd been afraid would be the case. If he could get them through the next few years in good shape, by then they'd have added some 400-600 offspring to the colony, assuming all the babies lived and none of the females died in the meantime. Attrition could well take about half of those babies, and in the normal course of events, it would probably claim at least one of the females. So, say, in five years, barring accident, there'd probably be about 150 surviving offspring. If they were all fertile . . .

Well, he'd raft that river when he came to it. In the meantime, it was up to him to take the best possible care of his furry adopted children, to give them the best possible chance, individually and collectively, to make a go of it by the time he, like all other mortal beings, finally walked the wind to the House of the Lady of Battles.

So, though it grieved him terribly to find the city so empty, devoid of any of his own kind, Dawn still had a purpose in life, perhaps the most important he'd ever had in all his days, and plenty to do ahead of him. The first thing on the list, he decided, was to move himself, his charges, and everything useful to them from the launch to a suitable site ashore. The university, with its lovely grounds and all its resources sitting, untouched, where its dying faculty, staff, and students had left them, would probably be the best place for Dawn and the eight rat-weasels. He'd have to hunt and fish for food, of course – there was almost nothing left at the university in the way of food stores, thanks not only to consumption of the inadequate supplies of food available after the Event by the university faculty, staff, and students, but also the activity of insects and other pests. But there were a lot of other things there that would come in very handy, which could well make the difference between survival and extinction for them all: medical supplies of many kinds (which, though they hadn't been able to touch the heretofore unknown pathogens that had taken down so many here, did include standard antibiotics, painkillers, antiseptics, and all sorts of medical equipment); hydrogen cells for power for heaters and air-conditioners and all the other electrical and electronic equipment that would come in very handy as the seasons wore on; blankets and pillows from the infirmary; cleaning powders and soaps from the university's laundries; a couple of hydrogen-cell powered vehicles; and clean clothing, sheets, and thick blankets left behind in the dorms by the deceased.

And in the biology department Dawn found treasure: pickers and baskets and other equipment for the harvesting of crops from the fields, fruits from the orchards, and both from wild plants; traps of all kinds for taking animals alive, nets for transporting large fish or restraining big ones in the big aquarium, dart-guns for anesthetizing animals that could be used for hunting! The prize of prizes, though, he found coyly hiding in

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one professor's personal on-campus locker in one of the labs: fishing tackle of the sort dedicated anglers used! Lures, lines, poles, small-nets, creels, hooks – everything a fresh-water fisherman could dream of, all of it top-dollar equipment which, judging from the photos of some of her catches and trophies she'd won for them she'd placed along the back wall of the lab's storage area, had obviously been acquired over the years by one of the late professors as a labor of love.

After finding this treasure, on a hunch he checked some of the other labs, and to his delight found the equivalent tackle for marine fishing in two other personal lockers, these belonging, judging from some scattered notes he found around the lab and the names embossed on plates on the front of the lockers, to another professor and one of his grad students. The gallant little launch hadn't seen the last of her active life, even now – he'd be able to take the little craft out to try some fishing around Sundown Bay, where Sundown City's harbor was located. He was glad – the launch, whose name, he had learned all those months ago through perusal of her logs, was Annamia, "Luck of the Lady," seemed to have a soul and will of her own, and would have suffered terribly from being abandoned. Her life wasn't over, and wouldn't be over for years yet, the Gods willing he himself stayed healthy enough to take her out every so often on fishing runs.

Continuing his search of the lockers in various laboratories and offices, Dawn also found two single-shot rifles, an automatic rifle, a large-caliber revolver, three automatic pistols, a pump shotgun, and plenty of ammunition for all eight firearms. He shouldn't have any trouble bringing down even very large game, at least until he ran out of ammunition – and by then, using the vehicles he'd found in the university garage to search the surrounding area and check out the stores in town and the area nearby, he should be able to find not only more ammunition for his found firearms, but the means to load his own. They were in business! All he had to do was stay healthy and strong enough for the next few years to get his little colony of mammals firmly established there, and then, when the Lady came for him at last, they could make it on their own.

So, driving one of the university vehicles back to where he'd tied up the launch, he began the task of transferring his charges and all their belongings to a suitable place on the university grounds. But first, before doing that, going back to the garden where he'd found the body of the young lady professor, he carefully and reverently interred her remains. Judging from photos of herself and her husband, children, and co-spouses she had had up around her office, she'd been a lovely young lady, full of life and hope – until the Event. As he lowered the box into which he'd placed her scattered bones and the tatters of her garment that had also been her shroud into the hole he'd dug at the center of the biggest of the flowerbeds in the garden, he told her, "It isn't over. Our spirits will go on, even if our bodies don't. There will be a future for us, through the faithful, gallant little beings we have taken as our companions, the little rat-weasels. They will carry our spirits onward into the future, and on to the stars. Do not despair, most lovely and brilliant lady – all is not gone, only changed, by the Will of the Gods." So saying, he began to shovel the dirt back into her grave. And when it was completely filled in, he planted seeds from a packet he'd found in one of the biology labs in the dirt over her grave – by next Spring, her gravesite would be covered in a riot of wildflowers every color of the rainbow, to testify to the glory of the Gods and Their infinite love and mercy, which would surely heal the world and bring their spirits safely home.

Now the days began to fly past swiftly, the year turning toward Autumn and Winter as Dawn and the mammals settled themselves into the university and worked hard to ensure their survival. While Dawn went out alone on hunting and fishing expeditions – Yip, who now had a wife and children to watch over and protect, couldn't accompany Dawn on such trips – the rat-weasels did their own hunting close to home, finding plenty of beetles, worms, small predatory mammals and reptiles, and other small game to eat. By the time the relatively mild Winter of the southern latitudes of Eastern Gond began, Dawn had put up enough preserved foods of all kinds – meat, fish, fruit, roots, even some wild grains – to last them all for at least two years, even without the plentiful supply of small game that the rat-weasels were able to catch for themselves. The first litters of babies were already learning from their parents how to hunt – they'd soon be fine hunters themselves, and would in turn have children as adept at the Great Game of Life as they.

As the Winter Solstice neared, Dawn had more time on his hands than he had had during the glory days of Summer and early Autumn. He decided to use it to explore the surrounding countryside, see what the local ecology was like, and get a better idea of what they'd have to deal with later on. He'd had far better luck fishing than hunting even at the height of Summer – birds there were in plenty, of course, but pteranodons, who were rather fragile in terms of habitat needs and other exigencies of their lives, had

disappeared completely, while the land animals, birds and mammals excluded, had become increasingly scarce.

The chelonians, however, were still much in evidence, sunning themselves on the rocks lining much of the shoreline of Sundown Bay, the Sun's warm light dancing off their shells, moist from sea-spray or the ocean itself, like one of the more benign aspects of the Lady's husband Riyal, the Destroyer. There were snakes, too, including a few deadly ones, like the big tree-snakes, and some of those small, orange-banded ones called "two-steppers" – after being bitten by one, you took at most two steps before you fell over, quite dead (fortunately all the poisonous snakes preferred habitats that weren't available on the university grounds, or preferred food that couldn't be found there, either, so Dawn and his little colony of rat-weasels were safe from such snakes as long as they stayed fairly close to home). Back up in the hills overlooking Sundown City, Dawn had seen lizards, including a couple of big, almost certainly venomous monitors, too (Note to self: not one of the places we need to go! Dawn thought, on glimpsing those great green-grey shapes haunting the ridges above his hunting grounds).

But as far as the archosaurs went, Dawn found vanishingly few. There was a small family grouping of protoceratopsians, a mother and two children, all of them obviously weak and sick, which he'd run into over on the other side of Sundown City, in a pasture that had been part of one of the university's experimental farms. There were also some confused-looking riding raptors hanging out behind another farm – whoever had been responsible for them had either let them go to the wild when it was clear the end was near, or they'd just jumped the fence and hared off on their own, else they'd have long since starved – but they, too, were unhealthy-looking, their once-brilliant crimson, cobalt, and-viridian scales gone patchy and loose, their eyes rheumy, their nostrils dripping a revolting greenish fluid, their characteristic musky scent turned sour and rancid and suggestive of carrion. Clearly neither group of animals was long for the world – he wouldn't have given a plugged half-cent coin any of them would last out the coming Winter.

He'd also encountered some smaller dromaeosaurs of the sort people raised for their meat and eggs running about the countryside, each just big enough for a couple of good home-fried meals for a hungry man, but these were becoming rarer as cold weather approached. They were small enough that a determined little mammal like Yip could take one down without too much trouble, and without the constant protection afforded by farmers or other keepers, they were almost certainly being quickly eliminated by mammalian predators as well as by snakes and some of the larger lizards, such as those hungry-looking monitors. To be honest, most members of this species of dromaeosaur were rather stupid animals, without enough sense to come in out of the rain (in fact, he'd heard far too many stories over the years about the poor bastards standing about in the rain, staring up into the sky to see where all that water was coming from until they drowned, to believe that they had any real brain-power at all), far too stupid to survive for long on their own, let alone breed successfully in the wild – one more proof that artificial selection for traits preferred by consumers definitely had its downside.

Had the birds fleeing the lands north of the Equator and the panicky animals invading from the northern portions of Eastern Gond to get away from the chaos of the Event and its aftermath brought in that many pathogens with them? Probably. No telling what parts of the world the birds had come from; they could have carried anything imaginable here, and probably had.

As for the fauna of Eastern Gond's northern lands – well, they weren't its southern ones. They had entirely different ecologies, and that had to mean that many or most of the microorganisms that flourished in the north, which the fauna native to that region had long been used to, and got along with easily, would be deadly to the established populations of animals here in the south. Then, too, there would have been parasites of all kinds in the bodies of the newcomers that would be vectored to the locals via insects, droppings that were taken up by local insects which would work their way up the food chain to the top, sexual activities between members of populations of closely related animals, and so on. As for the newcomers, they'd be subject to a dose of their own bad medicine as the microbes and parasites to which the locals were used got into their systems. If all this had happened slowly, over a much longer period of time, maybe the locals and/or the newcomers could have adjusted and adapted – but there had been so very little time, so very little! It was all over very quickly – and everywhere he went, he found deathly ill, dying, and dead archosaurs. To be sure, there were also sick and dying birds and mammals, but not nearly as many of them in relation to their normal population sizes. It was harder for parasites and microbes normally associated with birds to jump the genetic and ecological gap to mammals and such reptiles as snakes, turtles, and lizards than it was for them to be vectored to other birds or non-avian archosaurs. And

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apparently not that many mammals, chelonians, or archosaurs had made it down here from the north, either – the few that had might well already have died out here for lack of the proper food or climate, or else hadn't had the opportunity to spread whatever they were carrying to the locals. For whatever reason, there were plenty of healthy mammals and non-archosaurian reptiles here, along with numerous flocks of birds, none of which showed imminent signs of succumbing to the plagues that had doomed the archosaurs. So there'd be red meat to eat – not the sort he was used to, but still, as he'd learned in the Marines, the meat of snakes and monitors often made for very good eating, as did that of many birds. (As for mammals, they were mostly very small. He'd heard of offshore colonies of them on small islands which had had plenty of time to go their own way, genetically speaking, and had often run to gigantism, but the local mammals generally wouldn't even have made decent snacks for someone his size and build – and besides, so often they reminded him of Yip and the rest of his charges. He really didn't want to hunt and eat mammals if he could avoid it, thank you very much.)

Why hadn't he himself come down with any of the epidemic diseases that had felled the colonists here? Did the pathogens that killed them die out with the last of the university faculty, before Dawn and the rat-weasels had arrived here? Or was it that he wasn't in contact with things they'd eaten which carried those pathogens? Or what? Maybe it was simply that the Lady was watching over him – whatever it was, he hadn't the slightest feeling he needed to worry about epidemic disease. He'd learned to trust his hunches during his warrior training and in the service – he put that particular worry out of his mind and got on with what he had to do to make sure they would weather the coming Winter in good shape.

Autumn came, and with it some bonuses. In the office of a teaching assistant for the university's social science department, Dawn found audio tapes of his favorite types of music – classical, progressive jazz, and popular music (including, hallelujah!, one by his all-time favorite artists, Red Devil and the Flying Demons, with, among other selections, what he considered to be the best piece of modern music of all time, “Tyrannosaur River Boogie”) – in a drawer in the TA's desk. The tapes were in plastic boxes of the sort that insulated well against electromagnetic field fluctuations, and the EMPs triggered by the Event hadn't affected them. There had also been a battery-operated audio player in the office, complete with headphones, and even several brand-new packs of batteries for the device – apparently the TA had been a real music aficionado. He had music!

And the great university library proved to be a treasure trove. In it he found not only books on every possible subject, but also, in its Fine Arts section, numerous framed or matted prints of reproductions of world-famous works of art, as well as countless books full of reproductions of the best examples of the graphic arts of all time. He decided to leave all of these where he had found them, save for whatever reading material he was currently interested in, and just make sure that the building was weather-tight and free of vermin (such vermin as he found there were no match for Yip and his cohorts, who found hunting down and dispatching any such a great game, so all Dawn had to do was take care of building maintenance, and leave vermin-abatement to the intrepid rat-weasels, who were more than up to the task). He'd have reading material for the rest of his life, or, at least, until increasing presbyopia finally precluded reading altogether (though he'd found a general store in the nearby town that had sold both reading glasses and magnifying glasses, so as long as he had one good eye he'd be able to read). He had reproductions of some of the world's greatest works of art there, too, and the music that he loved – in town, he'd also found a store that sold recordings of all sorts, all packaged in EMP-resistant plastic, as well as audio equipment, so when he got bored with the tapes he'd found in the TA's office, there would be a virtually endless supply of other selections for him to listen to.

All in all, it was a very productive season. Dawn secured a huge supply of good food for all of them, including nutritional supplements that he'd found in the university dispensary; made sure they had heaters in good working order, and plenty of hydrogen cells for power; stocked up a great pile of cordwood and laid it by next to the vast fireplace in the great ground-floor lounge in the same building that held the library, just in case he couldn't get the heaters to work or just plain wanted a good wood fire of the sort he'd so loved in the Winters back at home in North Sandstone; and otherwise prepared for the Winter to come.

And, over in the university's biology department, Dawn also found – Halleluiah again! – great stores of seeds and grain-beards for the growing of crops that had somehow been overlooked by the last starving members of the university's faculty and staff, along with numerous packets of seeds for flowers of all kinds. Flowers could be wonderfully nutritious, not to mention a source of the beauty for which Dawn's heart was starved after all the ugliness he'd been through during the months after the Event, and, come next Spring, he

planned to sow a field or two to seed-crops and grain, and plant as many varieties of flowers as possible in the university gardens.

Then Winter socked in. It wasn't the sort of mild, almost pleasant season for which the Winters of the southern reaches of Eastern Gond had become famous before the Event, or even pre-Event Winters in North Sandstone. The Event's lingering impact on the planet's weather-systems showed itself with a vengeance now as vast storms swept over the land from all directions, covering the land with deep blankets of snow, battering everything standing with sleet and hail, and drowning the world with rains like vertical floods, nearly impossible to breathe in, so heavy were they. It was fortunate Dawn had taken such care to make sure the heaters worked and that they had plenty of power – by the first few weeks after the Winter Solstice, Dawn, the rat-weasels, and their babies were spending all their time in three rooms on the third floor of the strongest, most tightly-built, well-insulated building on campus, the one housing the university's library, taking all their meals in the office of one of the deans, sleeping in the library's records room all curled up together in a heap for the sake of shared warmth, even with the heaters going full blast right there in the same room. Fortunately there was a bathroom just off the records room for Dawn to use, and another room, one originally assigned to an assistant to the dean, in which Dawn set up potty-boxes for the rat-weasels. There was also a slot in the wall in the records room for dumping rubbish which led to a chute to the basement, so he could empty the potty boxes down the chute when they needed changing, then refill them from several huge bags of sand he'd appropriated for that purpose toward the end of Autumn from the great storerooms where all the maintenance and emergency supplies were kept.

At last it was Spring again, and now, as the Sun pumped more and more heat into the atmosphere, the storms grew even worse. But the cold was finally beginning to relinquish its deadly grip on the land, and there were days when the skies were breathtakingly beautiful, clear of clouds save for large cumulus anvils on the far horizons, filled with the wonderful scents of new green growth and the promise of life. By the Spring Equinox Dawn was able to get out and about enough to try planting some of the flower seeds and sow some vegetable crops in one of the vast greenhouses in the aggie section, where the new plants would be protected from the weather by the overarching roof and high walls of the structure. Just as the old saying had it, the first month of Spring was the cruelest of months, fickle and full of whims, slyly teasing with a beautiful morning followed by a freezing downpour by early afternoon, alternately chasing away Winter's gloom and cold with warmth and light and slashing down timid new growth with high winds, enchantress one minute and vile-tempered witch the next. But soon Spring's beginning yielded to the middle third of the season, the most beautiful of the warm months. A riot of flowers, both wildflowers and those Dawn had sowed in the campus flowerbeds, were blooming everywhere, the days warm and mild and full of promise for a fruitful Summer and harvest-time. And with mid-Spring came restoration of his hopes, which had begun flagging desperately by the time Winter, with its endlessly lowering skies and frigid temperatures, finally came to a close. Seed-time and harvest had come round to seed-time once more. The Gods had smiled on this battered world, and redeemed it from the Harrow of Hell.

## **Chapter 12: The King is Dead – Long Live the Queen**

And so Dawn's days went by, preparing soil, planting, tending, reaping – not only his flowers and experimental crops, but the fruits of the planning and thinking in which he'd been engaged since the Event. Gradually he fixed up a place for all of them in the biology department's labs, putting little hinged panels in the lower portions of the doors so the mammals could go in and out as they pleased without his help, making sure they all had plenty of warm bedding, dealing with fleas and other pests with whatever he could find around the university (here he lucked out; the university had been famous for its research on pest-control, and there were all sorts of pesticides and pest-control gadgets in the biology department, all clearly labeled as to their use and possible drawbacks); diverting a nearby stream to run by their new home so that he'd always have a nearby supply of fish; making and setting out traps for game animals where the rat-weasels weren't likely to go; and otherwise doing all he could to ensure their survival. And not just bodily survival, either – because of his long devotion to his Goddess, Dawn knew that the spirit had to be nourished, as well, if life was to go on.

So every evening, as well as on days when it was stormy and there wasn't much else to do, he devised games to play with the rat-weasels, setting up little puzzles for them to solve, teaching them tricks, even

reading to them from his favorite books, playing his audio tapes for them, talking to them all the time about his interests and observations and beliefs, showing them pictures of beautiful artwork in the colorful books of reproductions of the world's greatest works of art he'd found in the library. And as the months and then the years went by, he found to his enormous delight and wonder that his furry friends not only paid him close attention during all these activities, as if they were indeed learning everything he tried to teach them, but were rapidly developing a culture of their own of a sort he'd never seen in them before!

For one thing, they were learning to cooperate together on hunts. Though rat-weasels lived together in colonies in the wild, and associated closely with one another as housepets, Dawn had never seen this sort of behavior among them before, nor heard of it from any other source, either. Apparently this grew out of his habit of taking a few of them along with him, almost always including Yip, when he went on little expeditions around the countryside to locate resources and determine what sort of resources and dangers the environment was likely to present them with. On these trips, during which he went armed with a pistol, a rifle, and ammunition for both firearms, as well as a couple of good hunting knives, and even some fishing tackle, just in case he discovered an opportunity for fishing while he was out there, he frequently ran into situations where he had to take an animal down in self-defense, or encountered one or another creature that would be perfect for the larder. Whenever this happened, the rat-weasel pack, who, following along at his feet if he was on foot, or watching from the truck when he took one out from the maintenance department's garage for the day's expedition, stuck close by him in unknown territory, watching his actions with keen interest.

One day, when he was exploring the wild lands to the north of the university, Dawn accidentally flushed from the brush one of the unusually large mammals for which this region had been famous, one which someday, in the far future, a new kind of man would call a protomesonychid. He'd been coming through a stand of dense grasses interspersed with taller brush when, snorting and stamping its feet, the great wolfish beast rushed out of a dense thicket of brush and confronted him, pawing the ground and champing and clashing its jaws threateningly. While it was no real threat to him, he decided to take it down anyway – it was many times the size of Yip or any of his other companions, with short, razor-sharp tusks and teeth, and extremely sharp hooves on each of its oddly shaped feet, which were equipped with hard, sharp, hoof-like nails. It was fully capable of taking down and disemboweling a grown man with its tusks or hooves, let alone the much smaller rat-weasels, and they really didn't need such a menace around the university. There were plenty more of the creatures back up toward the hills, anyway – this wasn't the animal's normal range, and why it had come down here, when the small game it preferred and a sizable population of potential mates were back up in the hills, was beyond him. Dawn drew his pistol and was about to dispatch the hulking animal when suddenly, to Dawn's astonishment, Yip, who'd been standing by Dawn's foot, preternaturally alert, reared up on his back legs in a posture Dawn had never before seen him assume and, giving a sharp, authoritative bark, streaked toward the bigger animal at a speed belying his missing hand, lightning in fur.

In his concern for Yip's safety, Dawn opened his mouth to utter a yell for Yip to come back, and got ready to try to head off the bigger animal, something, anything to keep the big, evil-tempered beast from harming Yip and the others. But then, from the corner of his eye, he glimpsed six or seven other brownish streaks following closely in Yip's wake. The other rat-weasels were all heading for the big intruder, too, right behind Yip!

Moments later, before Dawn could marshal his thoughts and translate his fear for the rat-weasels' safety into action, Yip was hanging by his teeth and the claws of his feet and his remaining hand from the brute's throat; two of the other rat-weasels had attached themselves to its face and were ripping away at its eyes with their sharp claws; and the rest were going for its underbelly, grabbing on with their claws and then ripping and tearing away at it with all their might and main, using both their sharp teeth and their claws to slowly but surely eviscerate it.

Their target, screaming in stunned surprise, pain, and shock, reared up on its hind legs, trying to shake off its tormentors. Bad move – that just made it all that much easier for the rat-weasels hanging from its belly to do their job, which was disemboweling the poor bastard, which they proceeded to do with an unholy efficiency that left Dawn staring, slack-jawed, at what his small prodigies were doing to the poor, bewildered beast.

Becoming ever more frantic and confused, their foe tried to take on all its tormentors at once – which did a splendid job of keeping it from concentrating on any one of them long enough to do anything effective

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about its increasingly perilous situation. As it bent its head down in a vain attempt to reach its belly and the furry little demons who were busily eviscerating it, its attention was thus taken away from the ones that were doing their best to blind it, as well as from Yip, who, working his way steadily toward the big beast's jugular vein, had now torn a very respectable hole in its neck, from which flowed a rapidly growing river of blood. When it tried to reach Yip – which it really couldn't do, because of the way its head was joined to its neck and the articulation of its neck and shoulders – the rat-weasels on its belly and its face were able to redouble their efforts and do it even more damage than they had before. When it tried to shake off the ones on its face, those on the rest of its body were left free to continue doing what they did so well, namely, tearing the bigger animal to pieces.

It was all over in less than a minute. One moment the hapless beast, screaming and trying in vain to paw with its hooves at its poor wounded eyes and the little horrors who had blinded it and were now working so happily at ripping off the rest of its face, its sides heaving with effort and agony, was tottering back and forth before Dawn, battle-maddened rat-weasels all over its body. On the next it was down, bloody foam pouring from its nostrils and mouth, its eyes now two empty, blood-filled wounds, with gaping rents across the skin of its belly through which bluish-purple loops of intestine protruded, the crimson tide of its life pouring out of a great hole in its neck, gasping out the last of its life as the triumphant little warriors, crying and barking their victory to the skies, gleefully danced all around it. Watching them dance their victory-dance about the dying beast, Dawn was reminded eerily of the circle dances that were performed by remnants of his own species' primitive tribes, still in existence in remote places in the world, in tribute to Gods of Battle and Plenty, which he'd seen in documentary films

“Dear Gods, they *did* it!” Dawn cried out softly, unaware that he'd spoken. “– Yip, are you all right? Are all of you all right?” he asked the mammals.

*Turning at the sound of his voice, the rat-weasels stopped their celebratory dance and formed up in a line in front of their fallen foe, their bodies jerking back and forth as they continued to cry out in triumph. There was another note in their voices, as well, one he couldn't place easily – and then he had it: they were waiting for his judgment on their actions, his reaction to what they had done.*

*“Oh, what wonderful people!” he told them, coming over to them, squatting down by them, laying a praising, caressing hand first on Yip's head, then on each of the others. “Such wonderful people! The Gods smile upon you! Such brilliant people, such good people . . .” On and on and on he talked, telling them how brilliant, how clever they all were, how proud he was of them. One by one, Yip first, breaking from the line, they came up to him, huddling next to him, rubbing their faces against his legs and hands in obvious caresses, looking up at him all the while with star-bright, adoring eyes, as if what they had managed to accomplish on their own was somehow entirely due to him – as if he were, in fact, if not quite God, then God's high priest, the conduit of divine favor through which had come the power and glory of their coup.*

*In fact, they'd done this all on their own – and it was evident that for quite a while, Yip himself had been training them in group action, teaching them to follow him in this action or that as cued by whatever orders he barked and cried to them. Awestruck at what all this implied – the fantastic ability to communicate among themselves that implied at least the beginnings of the sort of complex language that Dawn's own kind possessed; the ability to plan, to create complex strategies, improvise tactics as needed within seconds; the ability to cooperate as a well-organized group in difficult tasks such as killing a much larger opponent, rather than acting on individual initiative in an unplanned, unorganized way – Dawn thanked the Gods over and over again for bringing Yip to him, then helping him find the little colony in the ruins of what had been his home, guiding him to that radio back on Oret's Dream, where he'd heard the broadcast from Eastern Gond that alerted him to the fact that there was a refuge here. Yes, as far as he knew, all his species save himself was gone, along with all their accomplishments and triumphs. And yet . . . and yet, their spirit wasn't dead. The little animals so many of Dawn's people had loved so dearly were still very much with the world, represented by the colony of rat-weasels Dawn had established here in Eastern Gond. Above all, the rat-weasels had begun to exhibit traits of group cooperation and planned action of the sort characteristic of Dawn's own kind, a definitive trait of sapient beings. They were sapient! What they would do, what they would become in the millennia to come he had no idea, but he knew that the hands of the Gods were on them, as on him, and that the spirit of his own species wasn't lost – these little fellows would carry that spirit along with their own into the far future. He had a sudden vision of the rat-weasels slowly but surely increasing in size, increasing in intelligence,*



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*slowly coming to stand upright on ever-longer legs, the new posture counterbalanced and supported by their ever-larger buttocks, learning to fabricate tools, at first crude ones, chunks of rock and pieces of sticks and bones, then more and more sophisticated ones, learning to use fire, spreading out over more and more territory, developing advanced languages and art and philosophy, growing taller and more robust, becoming –*

*Well, Dawn thought, sighing, as the vision left him, that he'd have to leave to the Gods. But though he was still heart-wounded, still grieving over his lost family with a strength that at times nearly doubled him over with the pain of it, his lost country, his lost species, the pain of that loss was now increasingly displaced by the wondrous revelation he'd discovered here today. At least the essential gifts of his species, their intelligence and playfulness, their inventiveness and capacity for wonder, their ability to plan and cooperate in action, were still alive in these, the children of his and of his species' spirit. In the presence of that wondrous moment he felt humbled – how was it that he, who hadn't been unique among his species, hadn't been famous or great, far from it, a man not all that different from all other men, had somehow been chosen to save and protect and nurture these little mammals who were to carry the spirit of his people on to the future when he, the last of his species, had died? Why him? "Oh, my Gods, I am nothing! I am overwhelmed at this priceless gift You have given me – help me in my unworthiness, that I may become worthy of this, that I may live up to this tremendous responsibility You have placed in my hands," he prayed.*

*Then, sighing again, rising to his feet, his joints popping and creaking a little with the arthritis that had begun to plague him in the last few months, Dawn asked the rat-weasels, "Do you want to take your kill back with us?"*

*They began barking and yipping at him in what sounded very much like assent.*

*"Very well, no problem, I can carry it over my shoulder, if that's all right with all of you."*

*It was. So, after wrapping up the carcass of the big animal in a piece of tarp he carried in his pack on such expeditions in case he'd ever need to carry something that was more than a little messy, he hoisted it up on his shoulders, and he and the rat-weasels began the long walk back to the university.*

*For several years after that, again and again, with increasing frequency, Dawn witnessed the rat-weasels, led by Yip, working together in concerted action for hunting, home defense, even, sometimes, in what had to be sheer play.*

*One outstanding example of that last was the time when ten or eleven of the rat-weasels had performed war-games in the area right outside the lab where they all lived, their objective apparently being to take away from a second group of rat-weasels of about the same number a ball Dawn had made for them out of rags, and to keep it away from them while simultaneously moving it toward a small hole at one end of the field. A goal! Yip's team cheered wildly over their triumph while the other team stared at them morosely from the margins of the field. Then Yip had hooked the ball back out of the hole with a flourish of his remaining hand, carried it to the center of the field in his jaws, and set it down there, and the game had started all over again. This time the opposing team got and held the ball long enough to get it down to a hole at the other end of the field, their goal, and it was Yip's team's turn to stare unhappily at their opponents while the victors danced and cried out in celebration. (And was that just his imagination, or, during that second round of play, had Yip deliberately led his own team to fumble the ball, letting the others get hold of it, so that they wouldn't become too discouraged with losing to continue playing the game? Naw, couldn't be – and that mischievous gleam in Yip's eye must've just been the result of the afternoon Sun glancing off it at an odd angle.)*

*There were plenty of other examples of the use of well-organized group behavior harnessed in service of pure play – which, just incidentally, all could eventually be turned to good account in the deadly serious businesses of hunting, group and territorial defense, and all the other activities necessary to their survival as individuals and as a species.*

*As season followed season in the ancient round appointed by the Gods since the beginning of the world, the rat-weasels became ever-more adept at their new skills. Always Yip was their leader and teacher in all their group activities, even in his own time slowly growing in his fellow rat-weasel's eyes to the status of a legendary culture-hero, only a little lower on the spiritual ladder than Dawn and Dawn's Gods.*

*. . . And then, one bright Summer morning, Dawn woke to find that Yip, who, ever since Dawn had originally found him aboard the Luck of the Lady (save for the times when Yip's wives were raising their*

young and needed him nearby for comfort and help with their energetic offspring), had always slept with him, was lying on his side next to Dawn, gasping heavily, his one remaining hand curled against his breast, clearly in great pain.

“Yip! What’s wrong?” he asked Yip. Yip raised his head briefly to look up at Dawn, as if he wanted to say something – then his head fell back to the blanket again, the energy needed to hold it up fleeing the stricken mammal’s pain-wracked body, the engine of his life faltering and staggering as it labored mightily to keep Yip alive..

Not daring to pick up his spirit-son – Dawn had no idea what was wrong with Yip, and didn’t want to damage him in the process of examining him – Dawn brought his head down close to the rat-weasel, trying to determine the cause of Yip’s distress. All that he could make out without the reading glasses he’d appropriated from the campus general store was Yip’s harsh breathing, as if he were in great pain, and the trembling of the mammal’s body. He noted with a pang how thin Yip had become lately, his thinning fur, the tufts of white that seemed to be everywhere in it – and he realized, all at once, that Yip, who couldn’t have been more than two or three years old when Dawn first found him aboard Luck of the Lady, now must be at least twelve or thirteen years old.

Like Dawn, Yip had grown old. But it was only now becoming apparent. Up until now, Yip had been so full of vibrant energy, initiative, derring-do, and adventurousness that it had never occurred to Dawn that Yip was nevertheless, like Dawn himself, steadily aging. Yip had sired so many litters, made so many kills in the university buildings and the fields surrounding it, achieved so many triumphs of leadership and inventiveness during the years since they’d come here from North Sandstone, that it had been impossible to think of Yip as old, with all that that word implied. How dare Old Age lay its bony, liver-spotted hand on so great a warrior, leader, thinker, and lover?

But it had nevertheless done so – and with a vengeance. While Dawn looked on in growing horror, helpless to do anything for him – all the veterinary expertise that might have saved him had perished with the rest of civilization under the hammer blows of the Event – Yip slowly gasped his life out, whimpering a little as the beast clutching at his heart sunk its sharp talons deeper and deeper into the very font of Yip’s long, stellar life. Now Dawn recognized the symptoms for what they were: Yip was undergoing a heart attack, a hideously painful one. And the only thing Dawn could do for his valiant adopted son was remain beside him, gently touch Yip’s head, his hand, from time to time to let him know that he, Dawn, Yip’s Daddy, was there, that he wouldn’t leave his little boy alone, wouldn’t let him go into the Long Dark all by himself.

An hour later, it was all over. Weeping unashamedly, Dawn carefully picked up Yip’s still-warm body, now empty of the wonderful spirit that had animated it for so long, and carried it over to a long countertop next to one of the lab sinks, where he laid it down. Looking around the lab, Dawn found a light-blue plastic box about two feet long, a foot and a half wide, and a foot deep, just the right size for Yip’s body. After lining the box with pieces of soft cloth from an old shirt of his that Yip had loved to curl up on in the evenings, he laid Yip’s body in it, filling up the rest of the box with more bedding.

Putting the lid on the box and carrying it with him, Dawn left the building and headed for one of the gardens he’d been planting every year with wildflowers, a long train of rat-weasels following in his wake. He’d noticed them gathering around, increasingly solemn and worried, during Yip’s short, agonized fight for life earlier in the day. When Yip had finally breathed his last, his body starting to contort in death’s rigor, their expressions had changed from worry to shock and loss. Many of them had begun whimpering, glancing back and forth at one another and then at Dawn as if wondering what to do. They’d all seen death before, there’d been the expected attrition among them from accident, illness, and so on, over the years. But there’d never been anything like this. Yip, the first among them, the one who had been there from the beginning, who had been their leader for so long – what would happen to them now?

Dawn came to the garden where he’d planted the prettiest flowers, a place Yip had especially liked, both for sunning himself on beautiful days and for the opportunities for play afforded him there by the butterflies and other insects attracted to the flowers. Setting the box down on a nearby bench, Dawn picked up a shovel he’d left lying there a few days before and carefully dug out a grave for Yip, one deep enough to make sure that predators wouldn’t easily dig it up, and that seasonal rains wouldn’t flood it out.

Placing the box holding the body of the child of his heart, the companion who’d accompanied him through everything for so long, down into the hole, Dawn wondered what he ought to do next. Then it

came to him. It was a habit of his to carry with him wherever he went a copy of *The Book of the Lady of Battles* in a pocket of his coat, shirt, or trousers. It had become so automatic over the years that he didn't even need to think about it any more. Sure enough, he had a copy of the book in his shirt pocket right next to an extra pair of reading-glasses he kept there at all times. When he'd hastily thrown on his clothes after first awakening and finding Yip in his mortal agony, he'd tucked the book in there without remembering that he'd done so.

Looking now at the great throng of rat-weasels surrounding Yip's grave, filling the garden with their bodies, their solemn little faces all turned to him as if pleading for guidance, Dawn told them, "Our friend Yip, who has led us for so long, has been taken home by the Goddess, as befits the great warrior and friend that he was. Someday each one of us will join him there – the Gods are good, and They will not long keep us separated from those we love, who have loved us. Let me read to you, now, the words of the Lady—"

So saying, Dawn took the reading glasses out of his pocket and put them on, then opened up his little bible. The pages fell open of their own accord to the *Preacher's Text*, one of his favorites: "Everything comes in its season, and every purpose finds its fulfillment, every desire finds at last its manifestation. There is a time for all things, for birth and death, sowing and harvest; for killing and healing, for breaking and building; for weeping and for laughter, for sorrow and for celebration; for casting away and for gathering together, for embracing and for abandonment; for gain and for loss, for keeping and for discarding; for tearing a garment, and for mending it; for silence and for speech; for love and for hatred; for war and for peace. All things are balanced out in the end, and he who struggles against this can only fail. The Gods have created all things, including the works of our heart and the length of our days, and They know all things, and the world They have made is beautiful. It is good, then, to rejoice in the life They have given us, even as we sorrow over the leaving of it, for in the end all things return to the Gods, and all shall be made whole and perfect in Them once more."

Closing the book and putting it back in his pocket, Dawn told his audience, "Perhaps some of you would like to come say a few last words to our friend, Yip?"

For a long moment none of them stirred. Then, suddenly, an older female, Para, Yip's first wife, the one he'd found along with six others of her kind back in North Sandstone, pushed her way to the front from between a number of others, until, finally, she stood right at the edge of the grave. For a few moments she stood there, her eyes closed, head down, as if thinking. Were those tears Dawn saw slowly running down her gray-streaked muzzle, falling into the grave?

Then, raising her head up to the sky, she gave a strange cry quite unlike any he'd ever heard her kind make before. The soft down at the back of Dawn's neck stood up and chills raced down his back as he watched all the other rat-weasels, who stood well back from the grave, as if in respect or even a sort of religious awe, do the same, raising their muzzles to the sky, sending their own versions of that strange, eerie call to the heavens above.

Then, as the rat-weasels once more lowered their heads and gazed down at Yip's gravesite, silence fell again, this time for at least a minute.

Then, just as Dawn had begun to think they would all stay like that forever, gazing sorrowfully at that hole in the ground where the body of their beloved leader lay, Para turned about and faced the crowd on her side of the grave. Immediately the mammals on the other three sides began to stream toward the group she faced, joining it, all staring at her expectantly.

When all the mammals were grouped before her on the one side of the grave, Para suddenly reared up on her haunches and, giving a loud bark, began to dance back and forth at the edge of the grave, all the while uttering oddly articulated little cries and barks. As she did so, all the others began to echo her, rearing up on their hind legs, dancing back and forth, barking and crying out as she did.

The strange ceremony went on for several minutes. At the end of it, when the Sun was exactly on the zenith to the north, Para uttered one last, loud bark, which was returned by the others. And then she turned and, a little slowly (she, too, was getting old, and the arthritis that had overtaken Dawn was making its inroads on her, as well), went up to Dawn. When she reached him, again rearing up on her haunches, she placed one hand on his trouser-leg and pulled gently at it.

"You want me to pick you up, girl?" Dawn asked her softly.

She nodded her head, a clear "Yes." So, with great care, Dawn stooped down and picked her up, holding her against his breast. Immediately, wriggling free of his grip, she jumped up onto his shoulder – at which all the other mammals, watching her, uttered one great collective cry that sounded so joyous, so

relieved, that it was clear that something had just been accomplished that overcame the terrible sorrow of the morning.

*“The king is dead – long live the queen!” they seemed to be crying. Indeed, their faces, which before had been so full of sorrow and loss and uncertainty, now were filled with gladness and triumph. Death had not triumphed – though their beloved leader Yip was gone, they had a new leader, their late King’s own first wife and Queen, Para.*

*Again chills raced up and down Dawn’s back. He wasn’t sure just what he was seeing here, but clearly these animals weren’t the dumb brutes so many people had believed any but their own kind to be. The rat-weasels were both sentient and sapient. They knew what death was – and they had their own ways of transcending it, their own forms of ritual and ceremony that enabled them to get past what would otherwise have been an insupportable loss and continue on with life. They were both political and religious animals, just as his own kind were. Had nobody else but he ever observed this? Or was this something new, something ordained now by the Gods, as a way of preparing Yip’s people to take a place in the world that Dawn’s people had filled all these past countless millennia, however long it might be before they truly fulfilled that niche in the scheme of things?*

*Whatever it was, Dawn knew that Yip’s people – and, truly, both from what he’d seen here today and from what he’d observed of them over the years, they were a people, not just a loose agglomeration of generally unrelated individuals – would survive and carry on, wouldn’t fall apart with the loss of their King, but rather would go forth under their new Queen, and whoever succeeded her, and the one after that, and so on down the years, to fulfill whatever destiny the Gods had chosen for them. As Dawn took up his shovel again and began to fill in the grave, tucking Yip in with a father’s care against the Long Dark, as much as he grieved for his brave little boy, he also rejoiced. He was getting old, now, himself, and it wouldn’t be too much longer before the colony would be entirely on its own. But that was all right, they’d be able to carry on when he was gone. He’d done the job the Gods had given him well. His children would make it, whether or not he was here to see them through.*

### **Chapter 13: End of the Journey**

*Two more years went by, during which the colony continued to thrive and grow. Para had no problems with her people – she seemed to be as benign a ruler as Yip had been, ruling far more through love than fear. However bad things might have become in the northern hemisphere, the climate here was increasingly benign, the Winters shorter and warmer than immediately after the Event, the Summers filled with warm rains and promise. Game was plentiful. The biggest predators avoided the university grounds – they had learned to fear the man with that awful weapon-that-throws-hot-metal-rocks and the furry little demons that accompanied him everywhere. Life was good.*

*And then, one morning, Dawn himself awoke to feel a great black clutching pain in his chest, and realized that his Goddess was now coming for him as She had come for Yip, to take him home at last. Even if there had been a physician nearby to help him, there was no time left for medicine to do its Magick for him, no time at all. The Lady of Battles was beside him, kneeling down to touch him, embrace him, and no physician could deter Her . . .*

*– What was this? Para was suddenly standing on his chest, her eyes huge, looking down at him in horror. He tried to rise up so that he could take her in his arms and comfort her, but the tearing, burning pain in the left side of his chest wouldn’t let him. He couldn’t seem to get enough air; he was so weak that he could barely draw breath.*

*“Hey, girl,” he whispered to Para. It took all his will not to cry out in his increasing agony, not let what he was feeling seep into his voice and upset her even more. “It’s all right,” he said, reaching up with enormous effort to scratch her ears. “It’s okay. The Lady is coming for me. She’s going to take me home to Yip. Someday She’ll come get you, too, and then we’ll all be together in Her house. It’s gonna be okay, hear?” he told her gently.*

*His vision was becoming clouded, streaked with red and black. He realized he had at most mere minutes of life left. Para was now frantically washing his face, trying to help him, knowing that he was dying, unwilling to leave him to go out into the Great Dark alone.*

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*And then he seemed to be floating near the room's broad ceiling, looking down upon the entire colony of mammals, who were all assembled there around his body, with Para lying on his chest, sobbing for her dead Daddy. And now, close by, he saw a great, black-skinned Hand reach down for him, and then he was being lifted up, into the Light, the Light that seemed to fill all the universe, a Light that was also Love and Joy and Health and Happiness, a Light filled with the spirits of all those he had ever lived – and here came Yip, barking and cheering, racing to greet his Daddy, who had come home at last, and right behind Yip, her arms spread wide in welcome, tears of joy streaming down her face, was his beloved Star .*

..

\* \* \* \* \*

“– Oh, Lady, Hannah, do you need a handkerchief? Here, here's mine,” Paul told me, proffering me a large square of linen he pulled from his shirt pocket.

Gratefully I took it from him, wiped my face with it, blew my nose. “Oh, heavens, Paul, I must be getting old, why am I falling apart like this?” I asked him as I gave him back his handkerchief.

Taking it from me and tucking it back in his pocket, he told me, “Hey – you should have seen me this morning down in the dojo with Yuri and Andy! I bet I went through three boxes of Kleene x down there myself before I was able to turn off the waterworks,” he told me gently.

“That was – oh, Lord, it was so sad! And yet it was also – how do I put it? It was triumphant, too – the sort of thing that Dante called a *comedia* because, in spite of all the grief and horror, in the end it all came out right.”

“Yep. More than you know.”

“?”

“Remember you were asking me if our modern cats and dogs and other carnivores are descended from Yip and his species?”

“??”

“Actually, they aren't. Yip and his people have modern descendants, all right, but not Order Carnivora. It's the *primates* that come down from them.

“Like us. We're primates, my love. We are Yip's people's descendants – and the spiritual children of Sneaky Rat, the Holy Guardian Angel of our species.”

Stunned, cold lightning playing up and down my spine, I stared at him for a long moment. Finally, I said, “You know, Paul, I would normally think that either you were just telling a great story, or out of your mind – but there's one thing that makes me believe it.”

“What's that, love?”

“As I recall, you were always an indifferent student of biology. Suddenly you've got a grasp of it at least as great as anyone I've ever known, including Monty – and you've been telling me things here, now, that require an understanding of subjects that I don't think even Monty's all that familiar with.

“Something really did happen to you up there on the cliffs, something very real and of profound importance. It turned you into some sort of biological and paleontological genius, on a par with Monty as well as some of the greats of the field of the last century, like Gould and Margulis and maybe even Haldane. That can't be shrugged off. I don't know if everything you just told me about was literally true or not, but in essence it had to have been true, regardless of the details.”

“As they say, love, the devil's in the details. For one thing, the oldest known fossils of primates are 50-60 million years old, and some primatologists have figured that the earliest primates must be at least 30 per cent older than the oldest known fossils. 55 million years ago plus 30 per cent is more than 70 million years – well before the Terminal Cretaceous Event. Given that Yip and other members of that colony lived 65 million years ago, how could they have been ancestors of the primates?”

“Then there are the Plesiadapiformes, a diverse group of primate-like mammals, roughly resembling prosimians, such as lemurs, lorises, tarsiers, and bushbabies, who lived in the Paleocene and early Eocene in North America, Europe, and Asia. Some believe they were archaic primates, but there is evidence that they aren't any closer relatives of the primates than tree-shrews or colugos are. They lived about 50-60 million years ago, and could have been descended from Yip's species. The fact that they never found any fossils of them in Africa doesn't mean much – fossilization is a relatively rare event, and the fact that we don't find

fossils of something in a given location doesn't mean they weren't there. The question here is, where do they fit in, if, indeed, they do at all?

“And of course there is the question of just when the first primates got to South America. The earliest fossils of South American primates we know of are about 40 million years old. Were they descended from members of Yip's species that somehow made their way down from North America before the Event in spite of the oceanic gap separating the two continents at that time, evolving in parallel with Old World primates? It's always possible – South American monkeys do differ in many respects from Old World primates in that they have flat noses with nostrils that point outward, rather than straight noses with forward-pointing nostrils, like the Old World types, and there are other differences between the two groups in terms of behavior, diet, and their preferred habitats. But they have many more features in common with Old World primates than they do differences from them, especially in terms of genetics and biochemistry, and, assuming that somehow they managed to evolve in parallel with their cousins in the Old World, from whom they were completely isolated over a period of 40-50 million years or more, beggars belief. So it's much more likely that when they arrived in South America they were already very clearly primates. So where did they come from, and how did they get to South America?

“The thing is, geographically speaking, South America has been completely isolated from the Old World since well before the end of the Cretaceous. It first separated from Africa over a hundred million years ago, long before anyone reckons the first primates could have come into existence. Of course, for some time after that, South America, which, with Africa, Antarctica, India, and Australia, had been part of the great southern supercontinent Gondwana, retained at least tenuous links with the land-mass that was later to become Australia and Africa. So maybe primates from Africa entered South America via Antarctica and Australia – but it sounds very unlikely, doesn't it? So if primates did descend from Yip and his people, how the hell did they get to South America from Africa? Maybe the fantastic fiction writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were right, and there really were civilizations like Hyperborea and Atlantis in existence at the end of the Cretaceous or beginning of the Paleocene, not human, but capable of all the things humans can do now. And maybe they, too, were able to travel all over the world, and maybe they carried primates to the New World, the way European settlers of North America and Australia brought such invaders as starlings, numerous different sorts of flowers and herbs, rabbits, and other plants and animals to their new homes from wherever they emigrated from.

“All sorts of questions – and sorry, love, but I'm fresh out of answers for them. The evidence for them, one way or the other, just ain't there.”

“Do you think Sneaky Rat was truly a man, though? I don't mean human, I mean, well, like us inside, spiritually and mentally?”

Looking off into strange distances, smiling a little, Paul recited:

“ ‘I am a Mesozoic man. Hath not a Mesozoic man eyes? hath not a Mesozoic man hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?’

“Hannah, what are sentience and sapience, anyway (speaking of both Yip and Sneaky Rat)? We observe Will using the intellect to achieve its goals, and we call this intelligence – but only if we admire the goals. Intelligence is impossible to pin down – there are no objective benchmarks for it, only survival needs of a species relative to its environment and how it deals with problems in its accustomed environment. Awareness isn't even necessary to it – considering the Turing problem. Feedback mechanisms alone could account for apparently consciously aware, intelligent behavior, which doesn't imply the existence of a mind at all. Each of us can be sure of the existence of exactly one mind, one awareness: our own. All else is conjecture. (Was the universe, complete with all our memories, created just 10 seconds ago? Questions like that have no dependable answers – at some point, we have to take things on faith, and such questions demarcate that point very well.)

“But whatever he was, Hannah, somehow Dawn – Sneaky Rat – forced me to relieve my entire past. Every shitty, rotten, lousy thing I've ever done, in full, glorious Technicolor with Dolby Stereo, smell, touch, taste – everything. The worst had to be the night we . . . you know, did those two banditos. Hannah, I was

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about ready to blow my brains out, just to end it, never to have to relieve any more of it ever again, just as it finally came to an end.

“But then . . . then he made me experience the downside of his personal past, too – and you know, it wasn’t all that different from mine. Or yours. Or Monty’s. Or any of ours. It was a life, he lived it, and on balance – given what he showed me after that – it was probably a good deal better than many and a little worse than some, same as the rest of us.

“Then . . . then he made me relieve the good parts of my life – and some of them, Hannah, were better than the first set of experiences were bad. Then he made me experience his own good moments, like his honeymoon with his premier wife, Star, and his first co-husband, the birth of his first child, the lives he saved and bettered as a peace officer, and everything else he ever did or experienced that he treasured. And again, in those moments I found that we’re not so different, his people and ours.

“Finally I saw him as he really was, or had been: an old, old man, weary beyond telling, scarred and arthritic, who’d once been a handsome, dashing young devil, with the ladies and gents falling all over him. He’d had a soul as empty and ugly as his body was beautiful then, for reasons that aren’t so hard to understand, if you remember me, say, 10-15 years back. His life was just the reverse of Dorian Gray’s: as he got older and wiser, more and more enlightened, he grew more and more beautiful inside, where it counts, even as his body got old and ugly and lumpy with scar-tissue.

“As he told me, ‘See? We weren’t essentially different from you in the ways that count. We even sinned the same sins – and dreamed the same dreams, reached out for the same stars, emulated angels the way Oskar Schindler did (not to mention demons, the way so many of your historical bogeymen have, from Herod and Hitler to the Clintons and Jack the Ripper). It was needed to know whether you would be worthy successors to us – if you could succeed us, carry on where we left off. And you can – else this would all have turned out differently, and you’d never have remembered my being here with you.

“ ‘Remember: we did not fail. Erda, Gaia, was only temporarily thwarted in her desire to have a child by our untimely extinction.

“ ‘And our world gave birth to yours, you know. Never forget us – and remember us among the stars.’

“He was . . . was me, Hannah, what I’ll be someday if I ever finally grow up. And that’s no bad thing. Not at all. My big problem now is finding out why he appeared to me. He was the Holy Guardian Angel of our entire species – so why did he pick me to appear to? What am I, that he would come to me, of all the people in the world? I’m damned if I know – I’m nobody, Hannah, a roughneck gunslinger with a shady past, and not a real good candidate for sainthood. So, why me?”

“But . . . I can’t get the question out of my mind: was it real, Paul? Were there really Mesozoic men, like you described, and was Sneaky Rat one of them? Is what he told you about himself and his world true?”

“It was real, love. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here now. Proving that would be a bitch – but yes, I do believe it was all essentially true. And as you said yourself, I came back from that adventure with far more than I had ever been and known and had, which can’t be accounted for by any psychology we’ve ever developed.”

“Why haven’t we found evidence of their civilization? Or of those that predated his?”

“Actually, love, I think we have – but when that evidence didn’t fit our preconceptions, we’ve ignored it or interpreted it to fit our scientific prejudices. And after all, the Event left little that we could recognize as being unmistakably the product of a great technologically advanced civilization. Most of what was left of Sneaky Rat’s world was charred bone and rubble, with an odd salting of iridium added in, which weather away and are reduced to dust rather quickly. As for the evidence, there’s Michael Cremo and Richard Thompson’s book *Forbidden Archeology* – though I find their religious interpretations of their data dubious at best, the data itself is sound. Beyond that – well, figure in 65 million years of the action of weather, plate tectonics, and above all life itself, masters at obliterating the traces of everything that went before them. (If you doubt living creatures can do that, look at a weed pushing its way up through inches of hard concrete sidewalk, various types of fungi happily chowing down on everything from paper to Teflon, earthworms turning hardpan into soft loam – believe me, life has it beat, hands down, when it comes to destroying the past in the service of the future!)”

“Yes, but if, as you said, Sneaky Rat’s people actually made it into interplanetary space, had a base on Mars, maybe even one in the asteroid belt or farther out, why couldn’t we find traces of their civilization on Earth, Luna, or Mars?”

“They might not have been out there for very long, so as far as Luna and Mars go, erosion, meteorites, and weathering would do for almost all of it. And on Earth, the same forces plus plate tectonics would do the same job. At least as important a factor in our inability to find evidence of their civilization is our determination to ignore the very real evidence of it that we have found – just ask Cremo and Thompson, or Pauwels and Bergier, the guys who wrote the *Morning of the Magicians*. Incidentally, Sneaky Rat’s people had the same problems in coming to find and accept the evidence of civilizations created by Permian, that is, Paleozoic man – they really did have some evidence of Paleozoic civilizations, and they were just as determined not to believe any such things could have existed as we are to not to believe that Mesozoic or early Cenozoic ones could have.

“Well . . . you’ve got a point,” I told him, smiling. “– So, was that all?”

“That was all of his life back then, 65 million years ago, anyway. Finally it was done. He had given me all he had left to give. He asked me, ‘What is thy name?’ ‘Paul Royer,’ I told him. Sneaky Rat told me, once again speaking in that archaic dialect of English, ‘Thy name shall be Paul Royer no more, but Yod, Man of Earth, for as a prince thou hast power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.’

“I asked him again, ‘What is your name? You told me, but it was so long, and I couldn’t pronounce it properly to save my soul.’ He told me gently, gazing at me with more love than I could ever hope to describe, ‘It’s all right, Paul. Call me Ishmael – for I only am escaped to tell thee.’

“ ‘Then he added, ‘Look in the place where I stand now when I am gone, and there you will see the fruit of your victory.’ And then he vanished, as if he had turned to thin air, as if he had never been there at all.

“I looked around. The dark wood was gone. I was standing in the midst of the scrub trees and brush that’ve always been up there. Instead of the morning of the next day, as I had thought it would be, so long had Sneaky Rat and I seemed to be together, making love and talking, it was only mid-afternoon of the same day I’d gone up there onto the cliffs. And there on the ground where Sneaky Rat stood when I first encountered him was that dead, Godawful mutant of a cougar – the one Monty and the others found me carrying over my shoulders when they met me there at the cliff-top.

“As Monty probably told you, the damned thing had at least half again as many teeth in its jaws as a normal cougar would; only one eye, not like the other had been gouged out, but as if it had never formed in the socket in the first place; an extra leg; and seven toes on each foot, with claws that wouldn’t retract. Its head was almost twice the size of a normal cougar’s – it had a huge brain, but that didn’t necessarily mean it was a genius or anything, because all the wrong parts of the brain were enlarged, and everything in it looked . . . strange, or so the guys in Science told me. Its body was almost twice as long as it should’ve been, and it had these long, long ears, more like those of a huge rabbit or a donkey than the ears of a puma. Its nose was pushed far in on itself and all messed up, with only one functioning nostril. None of us had ever seen anything like it in our lives – never heard of anything quite that malformed. Science said they’d never seen an animal so damaged that could still manage to survive on its own – but from the thing’s size and the white hair all over its body and all its battle-scars, it must have been very, very old. Even so, it could never have had any offspring – its lone testicle was full of scar-tissue as old as it was, most of it almost certainly a congenital problem of some sort, so it wouldn’t have been able to produce much in the way of sperm. And if it somehow did manage to produce any, there wouldn’t have been any egress for the sperm when it mated. So it could never have mated successfully, even if its genes hadn’t been so badly screwed up that at best all it could have sired would have been monsters. If Sneaky Rat was only a hallucination on my part, that thing wasn’t – go down to Science, and they’ll let you look at and handle the poor bastard cougar. It’s real – and if it is, so was Sneaky Rat.

“I guess this whole thing was my version of what Monty would call the Attainment of the Knowledge and Conversation of my Holy Guardian Angel, the Western Tradition’s version of the shaman’s journey – except, Hannah, except that Sneaky Rat wasn’t just my Holy Guardian Angel, he was everybody’s. I feel like I have a Holy Guardian Angel now, that is, Sneaky Rat – but if so, I’m also standing in for our whole world, because he’s there for all of us. I’ve sure got a few questions for Monty about this, because I’ve never heard of anything quite like this before, not in Eliade’s work on shamanism, or anything in those books by Crowley or the OTO or the Golden Dawn. This takes the whole question completely out of the personal realm. How can one mere individual have a Holy Guardian Angel that is there for his whole species?” he marveled. “At any rate, Hannah, I learned – not in words, but in the core of my being, the only place it counts, that like everything else alive, I’m part of something so vast and complex that I could never hope to control or even understand it: Life itself. And that in my insignificance that – that that is – has nevertheless



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always been fully aware of me, just as it is all living beings and spirits. And that it accepts me completely, as it has from lasting to everlasting, world without end, just like – oh, I’m telling this so badly, Hannah, I know, but please, please listen anyway, my darling,” he told me, gently taking my small hands in his huge, strong ones, his eyes two cobalt wells of radioactive pleading, pleading for just one other soul that might touch his, come to understand him. “And I . . . I saw, somehow, perceived, perceived with all my senses, not just the normal five, but all of them – oh, you have to understand, there are just no words fit to tell this properly, but I’m trying, baby, I’m trying,” he said, pulling me close against his broad chest, resting his chin on the top of my head. “It . . . it accepted me, the way it accepts every being, because all beings are part of it. It wasn’t . . . satisfied with what I’d done with myself up to then, especially the really bad parts, but that was doing, not being. It . . . loved me, Hannah, it did. As it does all beings, because we’re all part of it. I’m nothing, nothing – and that was fine, it didn’t matter, because being somebody or something wasn’t the point, and never had been.

“The point was the . . . rejoicing, the rejoicing of all its parts together, in its heart . . . The rejoicing goes on all the time, and involves all that lives, has ever lived, will ever live, but most of us never do that rejoicing consciously, do we? That’s what it wants – for all its being to rejoice fully, completely, together in love, with no walls between any heart and any other.

“This wasn’t Jesus, Hannah. Nothing that . . . explicable, that comprehensible. Or not even the being that most people, I guess, associate with the God of the Old Testament. I think . . . I think it was more like your Qaballistic Ain Soph Aur, Limitless Light, Monty told me it’s called. Self-aware light, light that . . . loves. Is love. And includes everything – even hate, even murder and blasphemy and horror, because those things are all parts of life, too, part of the beings that it loves. Endless black seas of infinity, in the words of H. P. Lovecraft – except that those seas are alive, informed with one spirit, black only because we mortal beings can never hope to fully comprehend the infinite, and within their blackness are the glowing blue waters like those that were once off the Florida Keys, or the near-shore regions of the Pacific Ocean on good days, replete with endless varieties of endless life, and all the joy of living.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “one of the very few people who might have comprehended this, Hannah, accepted it, was St. Francis d’Assisi.”

“Why him? Doesn’t the Roman Catholic Church teach that evolutionary theory and such great ages of time are delusionary, and that the evidence supporting them are just snares of the Devil to tempt us into intellectual sin, or something like that?”

“Not really,” Paul said, an odd half-smile quirking his mouth. “I don’t know much about that religion, except that it’s changed many times over the centuries, sometimes radically, such as its teaching concerning Jews and Christians, something you pointed out to me once, and which Monty has also talked about. I think all the Church mandates any more is that evolutionary theory not be used to supplant belief in and worship of God – there are too many exemplars of evolution running around loose out there now to doubt that it takes place, though the time-scales involved may be a matter for argument.

“At any rate –” (clearly something extremely unusual had indeed happened to Paul up there on the cliffs above the Keep. Like many others who had grown up here at Diablo Keep, inheriting their enormous linguistic skills from a plethora of languages and cultures belonging to the Keep residents, but not true fluency in the Keep’s dominant language, he had never before used such almost pedantically precise phrases as “at any rate” in ordinary conversation when more colloquial forms such as “anyway” were to hand and would get the message across. And he’d never before have used such letter-perfect linguistic forms such as “d’Assisi” from languages which, like Italian, were not well-known in the Keep, when English-language versions of the same phrase, in this case, “St. Francis,” were well-known here) “– At any rate,” he said, “Francis d’Assisi was a true spiritual genius, one who saw to the heart of all things, and would have known that evolution or not, the fact of God did not need theological fudging and denial of scientific evidence to be evident to the human soul.

“The great geniuses of the world – cosmologists Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking, Magus Aleister Crowley, biologists Charles Darwin and Lynne Margulis, the literary genius H. P. Lovecraft, who was the father of modern science fiction, and all other seminal discoverers and thinkers – have a drive to see to the core of all being, all that is, to uncover the first principles behind a wide range of phenomena. Such a discovery, or epiphany, causes the internal universe of its discoverer to fall apart, to dissolve into a chaotic jumble of psychospiritual elements, and then, via a major paradigm shift, reconstruct itself from scratch on the foundation of that first principle. It’s a process not unlike that in which a pupating caterpillar autolyses

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down into a homogenous goo that is then reconstructed into a butterfly by means of a few genetically determined templates left behind after the dissolution of the caterpillar. Francis d'Assisi was just such a genius – in his case, his genius was one of the spirit. (Though if I wanted to be picky about it, I should say that, as the Old Romans would have said, he had a genius, a presiding spirit inherent in him from birth and lying latent until realized later in life, and his genius was one of spiritual understanding, in the same way that Einstein's genius had to do with cosmological reality, and Charles Darwin's concerned biological reality.)

“As I remember from one of my history classes, Pope Innocent III sat in judgment on Francis to determine whether he was a heretic who ought to be excommunicated and burnt at the stake for departing from the teachings of the Church, or innocent of heresy. Of course Francis was ultimately declared to be innocent of heresy and a true son of the Church; that Pope said of him that ‘In our preoccupation with Original Sin, we have forgotten that [as in this man, Francis d'Assisi] there is also Original Innocence.’ ‘Innocence’ has often been equated with simple-mindedness, but Francis' apparent simplicity was that of Einstein, Tesla, Dirac, Stephen Jay Gould, Jack Parsons, and the other seminal thinkers of the world. For Francis somehow penetrated to the heart of Creation, and found that since all of it, man included, had God for its parent, all created beings and things were one another's siblings. Speaking to the heart of each creature out of his own heart, Francis made himself understood by that creature, regardless of differences in the languages used, species, or even realms of being: ‘Brother Sun, Sister Moon.’ All created beings, all created things, are equal in the spirit, all related through their divine Parent, each kind having its own dispensation from God, none of them loved by God more than any other. That was what Francis came to know and understand and teach. His simplicity, like that of Einstein, though in a radically different venue, entailed an understanding of the infinite complexity that is God and all of Creation. Such genius is in every living being and aspect of Creation, remaining only to be realized and acted on.

“Francis d'Assisi was able to make himself into the perfect instrument of God's will. God spoke through him to everyone around him, and was instantly understood by the listener. Your rabbi might say that Francis was a Tzeddik, one of the Thirty-Six Just Men, whose necessary presence in the world ensures that the world continues its existence. And he would have understood what my experience up there on the cliffs the other day implied, that God is present everywhere, from Alpha to Omega, the beginning of Creation to its end, over what are to so many incomprehensible reaches of space and time – and that God loves us, hears us when we cry out in extremis, and does what is possible within the finitude of our world to give us succor and direction and hope.

“Perhaps St. Francis was watching over me during my encounter up there on the cliffs, and maybe since then, guiding me toward the supreme gifts of acceptance and perception: “I believe, that I may understand.” At the time, I didn't understand much of what I came to see from that encounter – but I didn't have to, and I don't need to now. That, the enduring heart of Life, is what we are all part of, all living beings, forever, world without end, amen,” he said, rocking me gently in his arms, tears beginning to fall from his eyes, dropping onto my hair. He pressed a chaste kiss against the crown of my head before continuing: “And . . . it wants to continue. For all of us to . . . continue. There were men – potentially space-faring beings, you know, the gender and shape doesn't matter – here on Earth many times before our species, even long before Sneaky Rat's people came into existence, because Gaia has never given up trying to . . . to pass on her genes, to have a baby, and that's what it takes.

“So many of those species got . . . knocked out of the loop by a Great Extinction, as Monty calls it. We're just the latest, Gaia's, Earth's latest . . . version of reproductive equipment. And we've got to succeed at getting ourselves and other Earthly creatures to the stars, Hannah – there won't be any more chances for doing so after us, I think. I'm not sure why – Monty'd know, but I don't know enough ecology or evolutionary biology or astronomy to understand why. Maybe it's because the Sun grows hotter all the time, and before another version of us could come along, it would be too hot for life here, or at least the sort of life that could do the job we're supposed to do. Or maybe it's because this universe of ours is violent, very violent – all Earthly life has had its day looking up the barrel of a cosmic shotgun, and one of these days it'll go off again, and this time it'll finally do too much damage to our world for her to heal from it.

“Anyway, we're . . . it. We do it or – that's it, it's all over for Gaia, and she'll die sterile and barren, all alone. Either we get out there and take representative samples of her life with us, or she . . . dies without issue.

“As I said before, Sneaky Rat and his people lived at the end of the Mesozoic. He witnessed their end, and the end of the whole order of animals they were part of, as a result of the K-T event. They weren't

angels, but they weren't demons, either. They were people – and they'd have reached the stars if those asteroids or comets or whatever they were hadn't pounded Earth to a paste back there, 65 million years ago.

“And he . . . he was passing the torch to us, Hannah, through me, but maybe also through many others, whomever he could reach the way he reached me. Sneaky Rat was also the one who enabled the beings who became our ancestors to survive, taking them from North America to Africa the way he did. He was godfather and group-leader and high priest and tutelary spirit to Yip and Yip's people, and maybe something of his spirit was passed on through them to us, maybe even some of his genes, in those libraries of so-called 'junk genes' of ours. Because of him, we came into existence, and the spirit goes on through us, now, to give us the best possible chance of making it out there to the stars.

“He was . . . he was a brother. Brother, father, lover. Mine. Yours. Everyone's. Scary, awful – oh, yes, but so are we, when you get right down to it. His soul was like ours. And before . . . it, that thing we're all part of, he was no different than you, me, Monty, Leah, Leroy, anyone. I learned, then, that death and pain and horror are life's tools, not its enemies. We can be destroyed by them – or accept them as gifts to us from the universe and put them to work in Life's service. Which is what Andy means by 'the Sword that Gives Life,' you know.

“Somebody loved us, Hannah,” he said, gently lifting me into his lap, holding me close. “Somebody who lived 65 million or more years ago. And his spirit has hung around ever since, watching over us,” he said, looking off into the distance, the sheen of tears still illuminating his eyes. “He's the Holy Guardian Angel of our entire species, hell, of Order Primates and a lot more, besides – even, to some extent, our world as a whole.”

And then we sat there in silence for a while, each of us thinking our thoughts.

## **Chapter 14: In the Balance**

“Paul, I've got a confession to make,” I finally told him, feeling so guilty and ashamed.

“What is it, love?”

“You know the day you took off like that, when Monty was getting ready to go out there to find you? I . . . I urged him not to. I was . . . so afraid we'd lose Monty, too, all for nothing. But he was right and I was wrong – and if I had been able to talk Monty into staying, and you hadn't come back, or hadn't come back in one piece, I'd never have been able to forgive myself. I – you've given so much of yourself to me, to all of us, how could I have done such a thing?”

“Love?” he said, putting a finger under my chin and gently tilting my face up to look at him.

“What?”

“I know. Monty told me about it – and asked me not to get angry at you, because, he said, it was only out of worry over him. Hannah, that wasn't anything so bad, it was natural and normal. I forgive you. If that was the worst thing you ever did in your life, you'd have to be a saint, and none of us are saints! I forgive you, my love.

“– Do you forgive me?”

“For what?” I asked him wonderingly.

“You see, then? There's no harm done for either of us, then, nothing forgiveness is needed for. Hannah,” he said, leaning toward me, bringing his mouth closer and closer to mine, “I love you.” And he kissed me, a kiss both passionate and somehow chaste, full of love, without a tinge of anger or censure.

“You know, Hannah,” Paul said, after another period of thoughtful silence, “all human cultures worth a damn have rites du passage, ceremonies of transmutation from one life-stage to another. They aren't just symbolic, either – not of there's any viability left in those cultures. Such trials melt your mind down to bedrock templates and rebuild it around them in a truly adult form, the same way that during pupation, a lepidopteran or sawfly larva is reduced physically to a lot of gooey stuff and a few bits and pieces that serve as templates on which the butterfly or moth or sawfly, the imago, are built out of all that goo. Only with us, it happens to the mind and the information carried by the brain, on a psychospiritual level, rather than on a strictly physical one, and occurs inside the permanent cocoons of our skeletons. The mind melts down and reforms around templates provided either by a culturally created rite of passage or a shamanic journey in a process of going through what might be called spiritual puberty, the coming-of-age of the soul.

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“Apparently, we . . . technosapients, potential space-farers, don’t completely mature or truly become complete adult members of our communities and our world without some sort of, oh, call it a ‘trigger.’ Something has to trigger that metamorphosis, and do it right, or else you don’t come to full maturity. You may end up as a moral or emotional or sexual cripple – something fails to set right, or everything needed is there but the parts don’t mesh properly. So you have manhood and womanhood trials, things that can and sometimes do kill you if you don’t pass them, because the alternative is never to become fully . . . human.

“Only I don’t mean just human. Sneaky Rat showed me that. He showed me that all species that are potential space-farers are . . . put together that way. His people, of course, and us, and cats, and whales, and wild rats, and a lot of others. Any beings with minds like that, whether their bodies cooperate with those minds or not.

“Hell, a lot of herbivores have it – look at the young stud bull Tyrannobos challenging the old one, say. As for invertebrate animals, or plants or fungi, who knows? For all we know, they have them, too – we don’t know simply because we never bothered to wonder about it, and take a look. What we do know is that we are that way – and I think there’s a good evolutionary reason for that.

“We go everywhere, into every possible environment, building tools and life-support structures and systems to enable us to accommodate ourselves to whatever we find there. So we need to be able to adapt quickly to new conditions. If our maturation patterns were completely fixed, we couldn’t deal with certain important types of changes in our world, especially social ones. So our cultures do the changing, and then, through changes in our rites of passage, the forms which our maturity takes change, at least as far as behavior goes, maybe even on a biochemical level, too.

“But as Sneaky Rat showed me, what lies behind it all, regardless of species, has to do with ultimate limits, and our fundamental nature as living beings of any kind. We always live in some community, one consisting both of members of our own species and other kinds of life, from cats, dogs, cattle, and so on to rats, cockroaches, bacteria, and all the other life-forms around and in us, both wild and domestic. If our community stays healthy, it keeps us healthy as long as we live in a way that’s right for both it and us. But if we . . . push the envelope too much, if we lose all awareness of the needs of the living beings around us and become consumed by ambition and greed, we end up becoming a deadly danger not only to our immediate neighbors, but to the community as a whole. And if we do that, because we need that community to survive and do all the things necessary to carry our genes forward into the future when we’re no longer there to do so ourselves, we court not just death, but actual extinction.

“That’s what cancer does. A cancer is a histological sociopath, striving relentlessly to become immortal by beating out all the other cells and tissues in the body for food and other resources. If it isn’t stopped, eventually it kills the body – the world – it’s part of. And then it dies.

“What coming-of-age rites are created to do is bring everything in the nearly-mature young person to maturity all at once, in a certain pattern, such that the young person becomes fully aware of his community and place in it, what the community can and should give him, and what he should give to it in return. In other words, give him a complete moral sense. Not just ideas of what is right or wrong, but why those things are right or wrong. The perspective of a fully socially and sexually mature being – maybe I should add ‘ecological maturity,’ too, because that’s what it boils down to: one’s full emotional appreciation of one’s optimal ecological niche on one’s habitat, community, and world.

“Without that – that final click!, you’re always incomplete in some way: either a sociopathic outlaw, or a neurotic cripple, or otherwise not a fully mature member of any community, forever unable to fill any of the niches for which full maturity is required. With it – well, you are finally a fully accepted member of your community, judged by all its members to be a civil and fully contributing member of it.”

“Bar mitzvah.”

“Exactly! Exactly!” Paul said excitedly. “And in a way, it doesn’t matter what form it takes, symbolically and conceptually speaking, as long as you end up being a net asset to your community and thus to yourself. Sometimes it happens as the result of a conversion experience brought on by some hellish crisis or an encounter with the wondrous or weird – the ‘born-again’ Christian thing, for example. Sometimes it happens in a traditional way, with no epiphanies or that sort of thing – bar mitzvahs are like that in many cases, I hear. Weddings can be that, for women – didn’t you tell me that’s how your wedding to Monty under the canopy was?”

Tears in my eyes, remembering, I told him, the words having to push past a lump in my throat, “Oh, yes. It was . . . a whole new world for me after that.”

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“Okay, then, you know what I mean. And sometimes it’s wonderful, like the – the first time I had good sex with anyone, or the first time I ever made love to a woman. And sometimes it’s hideous, a true test of courage and even physical survival, like those ghastly female genital mutilation rituals that young women in some African cultures had to endure if they wanted to make a good marriage for themselves or just be fully accepted as mature women by their own people. You know the ones I mean?”

“Yes, I do,” I told him, wincing. “There’d be this old, old woman, a real hag, who’d perform the . . . surgery. She’d break a discarded old glass soft drink bottle that had been lying around in the dirt, and use one of the shards to cut off the girl’s clitoris and maybe a good deal of her labia, as well. A totally septic procedure – and nothing in the way of anesthetic would be given to the girl. As a result, a lot of girls who submitted to the procedure died from septicemia or shock or related conditions. It must have been a hideous ordeal for the girl, in every sense of the word.”

“Yeah. And yet . . . and yet in most cases the girl would actually volunteer to undergo that ordeal, so that she could become fully a woman in the eyes of her people,” he said. “In such cases maturity comes at a hellish price – but it does come, and is counted worth the price, because what’s involved there is one’s genetic and spiritual immortality through one’s kin and community. The alternative is extinction – and so the girls refused to count the cost, and bit the bullet and went through with it.

“And, of course, there are always the two ordeals that almost everyone in a given culture encounters: war and childbirth. Once a young man has gone away to war – or become a gunslinger, like us here, and experienced his first all-out battle with bandits – and in the process has come right up to the edge of death, he knows forever after what the true value of life is, what life means, and never again will he ever be truly young, in any way a boy. Similarly, once a woman has gone through her first ordeal of childbirth – and it is an ordeal; even in the years just before the War, many women did die in childbirth, and today, as you know, childbirth is once again as dangerous as it was back before, say, 1920, or far more so, and women die in childbirth at rates far above what they were in the civilized world back in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – once a woman has borne her first child, she will never again be truly young, a girl rather than a woman. For, like the young soldier in the heat of war, during that first great ordeal of her life, she has come up to the edge of Eternity and looked over, and seen the spirit of Life that informs it all, and the spirit of Death that is Life’s greatest tool and its ultimate mercy. A woman who has given birth at least once, a man who has faced death in battle – they return to their communities fully adult and accepted as such, never again to be excluded from the rites and celebrations and mysteries open only to true adults of the community. They’ve paid their dues to the last full measure for that privilege, and no one will deny it to them any more.

“Always, if a ritual of passage really takes, there’s some sort of real crisis, a true test of will and nerve, and a realization of what you are . . . are part of, that by and of yourself alone you don’t exist at all, but only have reality and life as part of a whole world of other living beings, with laws of its own,” he said, as if hunting for the concepts he wanted. “And that your, your True Will is to find your best path in the world that gets you where you want to go without harming the very thing you need to get you there . . .

“I’m not saying this very well, am I, Hannah? What I’m trying to say is, is, I guess, that I understand, now, what the ‘born-again’ experience is all about – and also the young Jewish men doing their bar mitzvahs, and the boys in the Australian outback who went through that Godawful penile infibulation, and the girls in Africa who had their clits carved off with septic shards of old bottles: in the midst of all that loss – loss of childhood and freedom from irresponsibility, loss of the capacity for pleasure and various parts of your physical body, sometimes even the loss of your life, you . . . get a good, clear look at what you’re part of. What you’ve always been part of. And where your true place in it is, and what’s needed from you to make sure that it and your genes and your spirit go forward together into the future.

“It’s a little like that Moody Blues song:

After he had journeyed . . .<sup>34</sup>

“Oh, Hannah, there is no such thing as just one human being. Or one species. Or just one world, or universe. What we are, we are because of what we are part of – Life, and the spirit of Life. And we forget that at our most deadly peril.

“Hannah, you told me about people in the 1970s and 1980s doing anything they could to get a ‘peak experience’ – dropping, snorting, and injecting themselves with everything from LSD and psilocybin and heroin to lye-based cleaning compounds, for God’s sake, beating off for 20 hours at a time, bungee-jumping,

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anything, trying to get that ultimate high! Even people up in their 30s and 40s and 50s were doing it. Remember? Well, they were both right and wrong.

“They were right because, while they didn’t really know what it was, they knew something important was missing from their lives, some experience, some trigger that would make them whole. But they thought it would be just some, uh, huge blast of sensation that would do the job, or some chemical tidal wave washing over their brains, like that. They never realized the nature of what was missing. The missing piece was a symbolic gestalt representing an accounting of the world they were part of, their true place in it as adults, what sort of developments had to occur in them for them to become adults, the meaning of their lives. Generations before theirs at least had had sporting events and tests of skill, formal weddings performed according to traditional specifications, baptism, First Communion, bar mitzvahs, all sorts of rituals that really were trials in their own right, real tests of the mettle of the young person on the verge of becoming an adult. And all of them had war and childbirth, the ultimate fall-back rites du passage. But in the 1960s all those things went out the window, even, to some extent, war, thanks to the anti-war movement, and childbirth, thanks to the more misguided versions of feminism. All that was left was sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, none of which were particularly roads to enlightenment or maturity without the proper context – and they had lost the context.

“So they tried skull-bombing themselves back to the Proterozoic, screwing themselves into hernias and God alone knows how many cases of vicious STDs, or going on motorcycle raiding parties or kidnapping young girls or boys and torturing them to death in hideous ways, trying to get that, that kick, that trigger they knew they needed, without any real understanding of what the hell would have to lie behind such a kick if it was to work.

“Some went the religious route, of course. Those may have been the most successful at their quest. Religion addresses the totality of our lives and their meaning, after all, and long-lived religions like Buddhism and Judaism and Christianity have always addressed that issue, and done it very well, at least on a general basis.

“Some went into combat arts, and actually found what they were looking for there in the dojo – that good ol’ adrenaline rush you get from having your ass dumped on the dojo floor a whole bunch of times or deliberately putting yourself in mortal peril can do wonders for your attitude and even your development. I remember the first time I ever got into a hand-to-hand fight, with this guy who was about twice my size – I was only around 8, and he was maybe 30, and I ended up black-and-blue, of course, but I put everything I had into it, and there was this, this exhilaration that went with it, even after having my ass kicked from hell to breakfast by the other guy, that nothing in the world had ever matched. I’d at least had the guts to try with all my might and main to stand up for myself, and while he did trash my butt, I came out of it alive, and the son of a bitch left me completely alone forever after that. I started growing up that day, and if any damned shrink ever tries to tell me that that isn’t the way to go about it, he can go to hell! That was the first time I deliberately walked up to the edge of the Abyss and danced along it, acting in my own self-defense rather than just hunkering down and letting somebody do whatever they wanted to me, and taking all the risks to body and soul that entailed, and it was wonderful!

“Others took a similar route, going in for extreme sports and that sort of thing, like that guy Evel Knievel or whatever his name was, the one who did all those fantastic stunts. People like Harry Houdini and other masters of escape, too. Many of those died young, like Houdini and Knievel’s own boy, who took after him, but while they lived, they really lived. Life at the edge can be one long ultimate high.

“And some – well, some found it in foxholes, like Monty told me about, guys coming this close to buying the farm, who suddenly start praying to God with all they have to save them – and a miracle really happens to them, and they become full converts to whatever religion it was that had that God.

“What’s fascinating about that, Hannah,” he said, shaking his head and chuckling a little as he remembered what Monty had told him about it, “is that the religion doesn’t really seem to matter. Monty knew four guys that had that happen to him, four different religions, four different Gods, and all four of them became ‘born again’ in their respective religions, which weren’t necessarily the ones they’d been raised in.

“One was a Christian, raised by what Monty called ‘half-assed Methodists,’ who became a born-again evangelical Christian after his brush with death. Another guy started out as Christian Scientist, but became a devout Tibetan Buddhist because of the vision of the late Dalai Lama that he followed to safety through the smoke and haze of battle. And one was a guy who’d originally been raised as a Unitarian, then got into Relyan Satanism, who had a vision of the performer Marilyn Manson standing on the Left Hand of Old

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Scratch, pointing the way to safety – and he followed it, and got out of whatever mess he'd been in with his skin and sanity intact, and remained forever after a devout Relayan Satanist.”

“And the fourth?”

“Hmm? Oh, a Jew, of course.”

“Of course?”

“Yeah. It was Monty. Didn't he tell you about that?”

“Hey, he started as a Jew!”

“But not a devout one. Not until – well, anyway, I'll let him tell you about it.

“The main thing, Hannah, is that conversion experiences are real. They're all rites of passage, often as a result of extreme crisis or stress brought on by things way beyond the potential convert's control, not a regular part of his culture. Like foxhole conversions and that sort of thing. They're real. They entail real miracles, along with all the other things with which religion is concerned.

“But they're not confined to any one religion. Anyone can have them, and end up a full-fledged convert to any religion, starting from the same religion, or any other, or no religion at all. And that means that all those experiences have to do with the same thing, the same fundamental underlying reality. Part of that reality is inside us, a sort of commonality of reactive and developmental response to such things. But a good part of it is out there, Hannah, and has to do with things that lie at the very roots of all reality.

“A true conversion experience is a Shamanic journey by another name. It has to occur on all levels of one's being, or it doesn't take. It has to involve your whole being – not only sight, hearing, and thought, but taste and touch and smell and all the so-called sixth senses, the emotions, the soul, the spirit, all of it. Otherwise it isn't quite real. That's why, for example, I experienced mine as making love with Sneaky Rat, not just being lectured by him – there's no other way he could have touched my soul and heart the way he did, because that's how I'm put together. As Crowley says, 'Love is the law, love under Will.' That is, love as the foundation of will, its ground and core and skeleton. Only when you give your heart can you truly change. And that's why Sneaky Rat made love to me, why I perceived him as making love to me – that was the only way I could surrender myself to him completely and, through him, to Life itself.

“It hits different people different ways, whatever way is best for reaching that person's soul and heart. The potential shaman falls seriously ill, becomes badly injured, ends up in a fire-fight, has to face down a fire-breathing dragon, or otherwise ends up in the 'Valley of Death.' He (or she; gender has nothing to do with this, and, as I said before, many a woman has gone through her own Extreme Trial and come out the other side, often in the process of childbirth) ends up facing something terrifying, something deadly, something that could really kill him or even destroy his soul, and does battle with it, and wins, and returns to the 'real' world, the civilian world, the quotidian, daylight world, with strange powers, real powers, Hannah, things other people who haven't been through such a trial don't have. Like Chiron endlessly searching the world for a cure for his unhealable wound, and dying because he can't stand the pain any more – and then, after dying, going down into the Earth, into the Underworld, then being resurrected and transported to Heaven to become a constellation, not just one star, but a whole community of stars! What, according to Monty, Aleister Crowley called 'Crossing the Abyss.' The point is, that experience, that journey doesn't have to take just one form. It can be couched in the idiom of any culture, any place, any time, as long as it entails someone who has to face down a life- and soul-threatening crisis of some kind, and does so successfully, in the process undergoing changes so profound it puts him outside and beyond those of his fellows in his community that haven't undergone such an ordeal.

“What Sneaky Rat showed me is that we're all part of one vast community that includes all who have ever lived or ever will. That's Life itself, and the Spirit behind it, what Monty calls Shaddai El Chai. All religions seem to be local expressions of that understanding and the categorical imperatives it mandates. And . . . and I seem to have somehow confronted that, Hannah, confronted it through sensei Sneaky Rat, perceived it as he did. And I knew, then, that even sentience and sapience are just Life's tools, tools it uses to get where it wants to go, which is all space, all time, all universes. We're all part of that. It can use anything, even death, pain, atrocity, horror, whatever it may be to reach its goals, the ultimate Magus, the purest essence of True Will there could ever be.

“And it – it loved me, Hannah,” he told me, tears starting in his eyes. “I don't mean in a personal way. More like Loren Eiseley addressing his lost hematocytes when he fell and had a nosebleed: 'Oh, don't go. I'm sorry, I've done for you'.<sup>35</sup> Loving them for their tireless, valorous work on behalf of himself and his

body, grieving for their deaths as the result of a chance nosebleed. It – you see, each of us is an expression of it and of its Will, so how can it not love us?

“By ourselves, Hannah, we’re nothing – because we are never just ourselves. Always we’re part of all of it, of our community, our world, our universe, and what these are and how we live in them define who and what we are.

“I think evil – real, bone-deep evil – comes about when somebody goes through a conversion experience, sees that whole glorious totality he’s part of – and rejects it out of hand. Says, ‘Not Thee, but me.’ Like, ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in heaven.’ That’s what cancer’s all about, you know, the complete denial by the cell of its moral place within the body, its ties to other cells, the morality that makes it possible for the body – and thus its own genes – to survive and carry on. The ultimate psychopathology. Before that point of, of moral choice, you can’t be truly evil, because you just don’t know what you’re doing. Like poor, stupid Canela Johnson. She must have ached for something to be part of, tried to create it herself, and died because there was no way in the world she could ever have succeeded, given the way she grew up. She did not know. Morally – spiritually – she was only a child, even though she was, what did they say, 28 or 29 years old when she died, something like that.

“I think the only truly evil man I’ve ever even heard of is Baron Bjorn of Fresno Keep – someday I’ll tell you some of the stuff I’ve heard about him. Monty knew this woman who escaped from there –”

“Yes, I know. Monty got some of his books from her, he said.”

“Right. Well, according to what she told Monty, Bjorn had his own . . . conversion experience at some point right after the War. Only he ended up rejecting all Gods, all idea of proportion in anything, any idea of natural limits, save himself and his own desires. He made himself into his own God, and ever since he’s been trying to claim the entire universe for himself alone, to do with as he pleases. He’s crazy, yeah – but evil, too. He burned all his bridges back to the heart of Life, from what I’ve heard, and it’ll be a blessed day when he’s finally dead.

“– Anyway, Hannah, I – I saw it whole. Saw it all. I’ll never be a follower of any traditional human religion, but I can sure as hell respect and cherish them all, because now I know what they’re all about, the reality they’re all pointing at. The only reason I couldn’t follow any of them is that – well, it’s like the old Buddhist saying: ‘Once you have crossed the river, throw the boat away. Otherwise it’ll just weigh you down.’ Religion would just sort of get in the way, now. But that’s not a slam against religion – that none of them would work for me doesn’t have anything to do with their value to human communities and individuals, which is enormous, one of the great pillars supporting all our lives.

“In fact, the only gripe I have about anyone’s religion has to do with the balance between love and fear.”

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“You see, love and terror are the twin engines of morality and moral behavior. We’ve all known what it is to be under the hammer since before humans as such ever existed. But most of the time there’s been far too little love in our morality. Maybe Sneaky Rat came to redress the balance.

“Fear of Hell and the wrath of God are, all too often, the thin excuses that pass for morality among so many of us. This is what Freud referred to as the superego, the internalized punisher that acts to terrorize you into being good. Fundamentalists have enormous trouble comprehending a morality whose foundation is love rather than terror, that is motivated from within rather than by direct orders from some power outside oneself.<sup>36</sup> Maybe Sneaky Rat came to make it more comprehensible to us. I met him in terror – and left him in love.

“Too much fear, or, by another name, other-directedness, and too little love, or inner-directedness, and we become slaves of what we fear, and will do anything to appease it. Of course, it can go the other way, too, and when it does, there are big-time problems with that. In the 1960s and 1970s, from what you’ve told me and what I’ve learned from the old magazines and books down in the Main Library, a lot of people decided to do without the superego, kick out the internal tyrant and ‘do whatcha wanna do,’ as Gilbert Shelton put it in one of those Wonder Warthog comix that came out in the ‘60s. And that’s great – except that they forgot to put anything in place of the superego to do the superego’s job, and the result was aimless hedonism and suicidally stupid behavior and truly cruel treatment of others, plus an inability to understand the need to protect oneself from intraspecific predators, to understand that there will always be such predators around, psychopaths and sociopaths, that that potential is as much a part of us as kindness and goodness and the other huggy-bear-kissee-face sort of things are. That period’s Zeitgeist was a



craving for ‘the ultimate peak experience,’ its morality ‘Don’t shit where you eat,’ and its one commandment, ‘Be good to yourself.’ Too little fear, too much love – or what passes for love but isn’t, not really, for love must also chastise when Life’s ultimate limits have been transgressed – and we forget about consequences, and end up disregarding clear signals of danger from other living beings, especially our own kind, until it’s far too late to do anything about it, when we become tomorrow’s cannon-fodder. It’s just like the Qaballists say, Hannah – there is the Pillar of Severity, and with it there is the Pillar of Mercy. We need them both, and we need them in balance, a true homeostasis of the spirit.”

“Have you told Monty about this?” I asked him, shifting a little on his lap so I could raise my head to look directly at him.

Giving me a light kiss, he told me, “Not yet, my love. Tonight I will. I just . . . I was only able to . . . recover all that today in the session with Yuri. I’ll talk with Monty about it tonight.”

## **Chapter 15: A Time to Rest**

The sound of someone clearing his throat brought our heads up to stare at the entrance into the kitchen. There was Monty, standing in the room’s entrance, smiling, one arm around Leah, also smiling, standing on one side of him, the other around a wide-eyed Leroy, on the other. “You don’t have to tell me about it, Paul – you already did.”

“Jesus wept, Monty – how long have you been standing there, anyway?” Paul asked him in shock. “We didn’t see you there at all!”

“Oh, ’bout the last hour an’ a half, ever since I got back from my office,” Monty told him. “The kids, here,” he said, glancing affectionately at Leroy and Leah, “now, they joined me mebbe half an hour ago, I guess.

“What time is it, anyway?” I asked him, suddenly realizing how much time must have gone by in the telling of Paul’s story.

“Oh, ’bout seven o’clock, gettin’ on time for supper, I reckon. You-all hungry?”

“Uh – yeah, come to think of it,” Paul told him, beginning to grin. “What’d you have in mind?”

“I stopped off at the Commons and picked up a couple o’ buckets o’ fried chicken with mashed potatoes an’ gravy an’ all the fixin’s,” Monty told him, letting go of Leah and Leroy and, bending down to pick up a big sack at his feet, bringing it into the kitchen. “We can microwave that an’ have it with juice an’ fruit an’ maybe a salad. What do you say to that, kids?”

There were no dissenting votes.

Soon the five of us were digging into our chicken dinner. As we ate, we talked over what Paul had discussed earlier.

In response to a comment of Leroy’s concerning Paul’s remarks on conversion experiences, Monty said, between bites of chicken drumstick, “You know, I’ve compared this process to the young knight-errant seeking out the dragon guardin’ its hoard, goin’ into its cave to challenge it, an’ then, if’n the knight does bag the dragon and survive the ordeal, he gets to keep the hoard for himself, and mebbe also marry the king’s daughter an’ become a duke or prince hisself into the bargain. The old story o’ the centaur Chiron, translated into Medieval idiom. But I remember somebody once sayin’ that the best way to get rid of an enemy is to make a friend. Sounds like you really did run into a dragon – and then made friends with ’im. You got the best of both worlds, Paul. God knows what you’ll ultimately do with your life, but I’m willin’ to bet any amount o’ money you wanna name that whatever it is, you’ll leave your mark on the whole universe for generations to come.”

“Well, whatever it is I end up doing with myself,” Paul told him, sighing, “I’ll bet it won’t be anything like what people were predicting for me just a few years earlier – you know, ‘Born to hang, that’n’.”

“Ain’t that the truth!” Monty told him, laughing.

“– Oh, Leroy, by the way, almost forgot,” Paul told the boy, “got a present for you.” Rising to his feet and slipping past me on the bench to get into the kitchen, Paul said, “Be right back.”

Exchanging puzzled glances with me, Leah asked Monty, “What’s he going to do?”

“Oh, he’ll show us all in good time, don’t worry,” Monty told her, smiling.

In fact it hardly seemed more than a couple of minutes before he was back, holding several CDs and a bright yellow and red carton with Alfred E. Neuman’s gently smiling idiot face on the side. “Leroy, here –

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I'm not gonna be here for your 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, so I wanted to give this to you early. Happy birthday," he said, handing the CDs and the Totally MAD collection to the delighted boy.

"Oh, wow, man! You really mean that?"

"Of course I do," Paul told him, taking his seat next to me again, across from Monty, Leroy, and Leah.

"Oh, wow – Dr. Demento! And Stan Freberg, and Tom Lehrer! Oh, Paul, thank you! I've always wanted to have these for my very own – how'd you know?"

"Oh, just a hunch," Paul told him with a grin.

"Here, let me take these to my room so they won't be in the way," Leroy said, getting to his feet and squeezing past Leah, who sat on the outside. "I'll be right back . . ."

As Leroy raced to his room with his presents, wearing a grin so broad it seemed to light the room up like noon, Leah, reaching across the table to take Paul's hand, told him, "Oh, Paul, that was the sweetest thing . . . But they were your treasures! Are you sure –"

"Sweetheart," he told her, giving her hand a squeeze, "I guess a guy has to grow up sometime. There's a time and a place for those – and Leroy appreciates things like that. This is his time for them. And you can be sure that when Pat Wall puts in CD-burners for all of us, Leroy'll make lots of copies of them for the big library downstairs as well as any of us who want them.

"And I really couldn't think of anything he'd want more for his birthday. You saw how happy those CDs and the MAD collection made him – that was worth everything to see him that happy, you know?"

I looked at Monty, who was regarding Paul with a knowing, affectionate smile. "Mazel tov, my boy," he told Paul.

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"I'd say you just had your bar mitzvah – mebbe a few years late, but you got there, an' that's all that counts."

"Well, let's hope. – So what all did you get done today, anyway?"

As he'd said he planned to do, Monty had gone down to Administration to get stats on all of us. Then he'd gone over to Accounting to check their accounts against Administration's records, and, taking the print-outs he ordered Accounting to run off for him back to his office, confirmed that Paul, Leah, and Leroy should have had a great deal more in their accounts than it showed in Accounting's records. Depositing both sets of print-outs, Accounting's and Administration's, with Administration for safekeeping in their big vault, Monty then went over to Stores to pay up his accounts with them in person so he wouldn't have to do it between the time Paul and Leah were to leave for the drive and the day he and I would do so, wanting that time alone with his wife, time he'd never really had throughout the ten years of our marriage. While he was in Stores, he also collected all the things he had stored in a locker in that department's storage rooms, and, using a carrier, brought them up to our suite, including all his Navajo rugs and artifacts, turquoise and silver artifacts and jewelry, and other small personal possessions, along with his pool table – the carrier was sitting there, right outside, waiting for the five of us to go back out and unload it.

"When everybody's had dessert an' all, I sure could use a hand with that stuff," he told us.

"No problem," Paul told him. "I'm ready any time you are, bro'."

"Same here, Daddy," Leroy said, returning from his room. "You actually brought up a whole pool table?"

"Well, I sure wasn't about to cut it in half an' leave the other half down there," Monty teased him, laughing. "Yes, a real pool table, son. What say to a game or two tomorrow or so? I'll spot you two balls."

"Wow!" Leroy exclaimed joyously as he took his seat between Monty and Leah again.

"I've pretty much finished," I told Monty.

"So've I," Leah said. "You want to go do that unloading now?"

"Ain't no time like the present, my dear," Monty told her, rising to his feet and stretching his arms to get the kinks out. "What do you say we all go do that thing?"

A few minutes later the five of us were out by the carrier, carefully unloading Monty's things and carrying them into our suite. Paul and Monty took charge of the pool-table, while Leah, Leroy, and I started bringing in Monty's beautiful Navajo rugs and pottery and his other priceless Southwestern mementos. "Where do you want these, sweetheart?" I asked Monty as I started in through the door with a rug done in earth-tones, yellow, ivory, and aquamarine.

"Hmm . . . mebbe in the study, at least for now. We can arrange 'em here an' there later, once we have a better idea how much stuff we have an' how much space to put it all in. – Here, Paul, let's get this bastard

inside an' take it into the library – it's got plenty o' room for it even with the bookcases in.," he said, hefting his end of the pool table.

"Right-o, bro'," Paul told him, picking up the slack on the table's front end and, with Monty, heading with it for the open door of the suite.

It didn't take too long to get everything inside. "Okay, kids, I'm gonna take the carrier back down to Stores an' log it back in there," Monty said, once the last of it had been taken into our suite. "I won't be long. Batrix, if'n you want to put up any o' my stuff anywhere in particular, go ahead – you've got one o' the most fine-tuned esthetic senses I've ever seen, and a good feel for how to make the best use of a given amount o' space."

"Sure, sweetheart. You'll be okay?"

"Aw, honey, I don't think anybody's gonna give me any trouble now. Not here, in the Keep, anyway. After you cut down Canela the way you did, people started rememb'rin' just how good both of us've been with our guns in our time. Plus, it's still so soon after the event that if anythin' happens to me now, you know what people are gonna think. No, if'n somebody's gonna make a move on us, it won't be for at least a couple o' weeks, an' prob'ly a lot longer – mebbe when we're on the drive, say, or after that."

"Why am I not reassured? Oh, well," I told him, sighing resignedly, "you have to pay toll – kiss," I ordered him, holding my cheek up for one.

Laughing, he swung me about so that he could plant a proper one square on my mouth. The kiss lasted for what threatened to become an indecently long time before we broke it off. "Okay, sweetheart, I'll be right back," he told me, as if wanting to go for another one even better than that first kiss, but knowing that if he did, he wouldn't get the carrier back to Stores before tomorrow, and would have to pay extra for bringing it back late.

While he was gone, the rest of us busied ourselves finding places for Monty's things. Leroy decided that Monty's big Mexican saddle, the one trimmed in silver and turquoises, just had to go in the front room, right next to the fireplace. As he bent down to pick it up and move it from near the front door over to the far side of the fireplace, Paul, smiling, asked him, 'Can you manage that, Leroy?'

"Sure. It's not that heavy, Paul," the boy told him gamely, hefting the thing up with some difficulty. In spite of Leroy's disclaimer, the saddle was very heavy, the saddle-tree on which it was built made of solid oak, a saddle truly fit for a king. "– Mom, does Daddy ever use this when he's out riding?"

"Er, he has used it a couple of times, but not for work – that's strictly for show. We've had a couple of festivals here where he's used it on one of our big horses, the Clydesdales or Percherons, and once they held a rodeo over at San Bee and we went to it and they had him ride in their big Grand Master's parade along with all the other local barons, and he used it then. But it's too heavy and, oh, itchy, I'd say, for most purposes, and too likely to get dinged up."

"Mm. – I'd like to see him on one of the Clydesdales with it, sometime. He'd look – oh, something like a Southwestern version of a Norman warlord. You know those big horses came from stock that was originally bred for war-horses?" Leroy said, grunting with effort as he carried the saddle across the room and laid it down by the fireplace.

"Yes, I did, but I hadn't thought of Monty looking like a Norman aristocrat before . . . though come to think of it, you're right," I told him thoughtfully as I began setting out some of the pottery on windowsills and shelves in various places about the front room. "He does seem like a sort of feudal aristocrat – if you're talking about the best aspects of feudalism rather than the worst, that is. The sort of lord who was hell on anybody or anything who menaced his people, but was kind, generous, charitable, fair, and just with everyone else."

"He's a big man, you know, Mom? I don't mean just physical size – he's almost a sort of king, he fills up any room he's in with his aura, like a Sun. The sort of thing some said about Haille Selassie, and the way the legends described King Arthur and King David."

"Don't tell Monty that," I told him, smiling.

"Why not, Mom? It's true."

"Oh, I agree – but one of Monty's favorite quotes is, 'We begged Samuel to give us a king, until he got so tired of it he broke down and anointed one for us. Then we never stopped cursing him for it.' – Hey, are you all right?" I asked him, alarmed, as a series of odd snorts erupted from him.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Leroy said, grinning, after he got his laughter under control, "That was really funny. Does he really say that?"

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“Oh, about every time we get hot and heavy into discussing politics. He’s not real big on royalty or any other form of politics except libertarianism. – Where do you think this should go, hon?” I asked him, hoisting up a framed reproduction of Roger Perkins’ 1991 e.v. painting Pueblo Sisters, with its brilliant blues, yellows, and stark ivory contrasting sharply with earth-tones.

“Oh, wow! – Uh, you want to hang that up on the wall above the holoplayer, I think,” Leroy told me, pointing.

“Okay, let me just get the hammer and a nail . . .” A minute or two later, I had the print up where Leroy had indicated. “Any ideas as to where the others ought to go?”

“What else does he have?” Leroy asked, coming over to look at the prints stacked against the ends of the couches.

“Well, there’s this one, Moon, Morning Star and Evening Star, by Blumenschein . . .” I pulled it out from the stack. Its vivid coloring, solar yellows against earth-tones of red, green, brown, and mauve, depicted a composite of rituals expressing thanksgiving for crops and game animals performed by Pueblo Indians. “Or this – Mission San Gabriel, by Ferdinand Deppe, painted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.” This one showed the Mission as it had probably looked back when first built, a beehive-shaped native home next to a low palm in the foreground, with a background of verdant green hills and, father back, great, snow-capped mountains, part of the San Gabriel range that we ourselves lived in.

“Hey, is that the way the San Gabriel Mission really looked?” Leroy asked, fascinated with the sight.

“With leeway for acceptable artistic license, yes, I imagine so.”

“I know where that is! Right down there in the Basin!”

“That’s right.”

“Then those mountains – that’s where we are! Mom, can I have that in my bedroom?”

“I don’t see why not, Leroy. It’s a beautiful view, isn’t it?”

“Maybe someday –” he began, an odd, wistful note in his voice. Then, abruptly thinking better of it, he stopped, looking aside for a moment. Raising his eyes again, he said, “Will Daddy mind, though?”

“I can’t think why. Sure, go ahead and put it in your room. We’ve got a lot of those prints here, and there’s only room for a few out here and in our room. – Paul,” I asked, as Paul came back out from the room he was planning to share with Leah, “would you and Leah like to hang some of these in your room?”

“What’cha got, girl?” he asked me, coming over to look at the prints. “Hmm . . . yeah, why not? – Oh, hey, I like this one,” he told me, pulling out a reproduction of Cochiti Green Corn Dance with Koshare by Joe Hilario Herrera, which the artist had executed in 1947, according to the label on the back of the frame. “There’s another one, though . . .”

“?”

“I . . . saw it in Monty’s old place, where he lived before he married you. Most of the prints he had then were of the American Southwest, but one of them, I think it was called Westward the Star of Empire, showed this sunset scene out on the Great Plains, with an oncoming train headed along tracks straight for the viewer, and next to the tracks were these Indians, sneaking things onto the tracks to derail the train. There was something so . . . so compelling about that painting. I loved it, even though looking at it made me feel so strange, like looking at a scene from the end of the world. – Which, in a way, it was, the end of those Indians’ world, anyway. He also had a couple of Remingtons – ah, here they are,” he said, drawing out one titled Indian Warfare, showing a skirmish between Cheyenne Indians and US Army troopers on the plains, and another, a lithograph in sepia tones, of a romantic portrayal of an Indian and a trapper greeting each other somewhere in western Canada. “And here’s one of my all-time favorites,” he said, drawing out a famous print by George Catlin; done in 1834, it showed, hanging by one heel from a horse running at full gallop, so that he was shielded from the enemy’s view but still able to shoot arrows with deadly accuracy, a Comanche warrior bringing down his enemies with unerring accuracy. “– Oh, hi, Monty. Okay if I take some of these prints for Leah’s and my room?” he asked as Monty, just back from Stores, came through the front door.

“Sure, sure, that’s what they’re there for, my darling,” Monty told him. “– Shit, Batrix, Situation Normal, All Fucked Up – again,” he said as he closed the door and hung his guns up on a peg by the door.

“Oh, no – did someone –?” I asked him, alarmed, forgetting all about the prints as I ran toward him.

“No, no, darlin’, nothin’ bad, no shoot-outs or anything like that,” he said, sighing. “Just the usual shit – they’ve somehow lost two carriers down there, nobody has any idea how.”

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“Lost – wait a minute. How the hell can you lose two of those things?!” I said, as he leaned down and, picking me up, carried me over to the couch, where he sat down with me on his lap.

“Somebody apparently took ’em out but didn’t log ’em out, nobody knows who.”

“Do you think it might have something to do with Accounting or Canela or anything like that?”

Shrugging tiredly, he said, “It could’a been anybody or anythin’, for any reason or no reason. – Paul!”

“What’s up, Monty?”

“You know you an’ Leah can help yourself to any o’ this stuff if’n you want – I’d forgotten just how much stuff I had. We can only fit a little of it into the master bedroom, so you an’ Leah an’ Leroy take any of it you want.”

“To keep?” said Leah, who had just come out from the hallway leading to the bedrooms. “Oh, Monty –

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“Well, why not, darlin’? Look, I accumulated all this stuff when I was still a young buck, hopin’ I’d have a home for it all someday. Now I do – an’ people in my home who’ll appreciate it. That’s what it’s for, to grace the home o’ those who’ll best appreciate it. I can’t live forever, anyways, an’ I’d just as soon have the pleasure o’ sharin’ it with those I love, now, whilst I still can enjoy it, than leavin’ those things to others when I’m gone and forgotten, you know?”

“Oh, Monty . . . Well, we’ll certainly treasure these,” Leah told him, as Paul began to show her prints he’d picked out. He’d finally located Westward the Star of Empire, with its spooky sunset light and ominous implications. He showed it to Leah for her approval; smiling, she nodded.

“I like her attitude – she’s as morbid as me,” Monty, chuckling, told me in a prison-yard whisper. Leah tendered him a brief shake of the head and a grin, then went back to looking over Monty’s treasure-trove, trying to decide which things she wanted for Paul’s and her bedroom.

“A little morbidity is good for the soul, I hear. – Okay, which ones do you want for our bedroom, then?” I asked him.

An hour later we had pretty much found homes for everything, with some of the prints going in each of the three bedrooms, others in the front room, study, and library. The pottery pieces, of which there weren’t all that many, fit comfortably in niches around the front room and in the library, while the rugs, of which there were four or five, found homes on the walls and floors of the three bedrooms, the study, and the front room. Assorted knick-knacks made of silver and turquoise went into the master bedroom. The piece de resistance, some gorgeous Navajo jewelry, all huge turquoises shimmering like chunks of clear Arizona sky in massive settings of silver, Monty held out to me. “Darlin’, I got these way back when for the bride I knew I’d have someday. Then I put ’em away an’ forgot they was there – can you beat that? Anyways, by rights these are yours – I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have wearing them.”

“Oh, Monty, they’re gorgeous! Oh, thank you, sweetheart, thank you! Shall I put them on now?”

“Well, you can if’n you want, they’re yours,” he told me, chuckling again, “but I think you’ll want to save those for fancy occasions, you know? – But ain’t they pretty, though? They’ll set off your eyes an’ hair just perfectly.”

“Hey, Monty!”

“What’s up, Paul?”

“Want to come in and see what I did with my stuff in Leah’s and my room?”

“Sure, why not? Be right there. – Here, you want to go see Paul an’ Leah’s room with me?” he asked me.

“I’m game if you are,” I told him, laughing.

“Okay, darlin’, here we go . . .” Picking me up in his arms, he followed Paul back to the room which Paul planned to share with Leah, Leroy trailing in our wake.

“Oh, neat!” Leroy cried, looking at the tiger-skin rug that now covered that half of the room not occupied by the bed, which had been shifted over to the room’s east wall to make room for the rug. “Where’d you get that, Paul?”

“Would you believe somebody’s condo down by what was left of the Wilshire District, back about twelve years ago?” Paul told him as he and Leah began dressing the bed with mattress-pad, sheets, and blankets – they’d stripped it so they could put on sheets and covers that went better with the rug. “Batrrix took a bunch of us out on this exploratory expedition down that way, to see what we could find. There was this one building that somehow got missed by the fires, though the outside was all dinged up and streaked with soot. Only reason nobody’d broken into it before was that the entire downstairs was boarded up and

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the upstairs – it was a four-story building – looked derelict, at least from the ground floor. As if it had been condemned from before the War. Ol' Montel, here, wasn't so sure – he decided to bust into it, tearing off some of the paneling over a ground-floor window.

“Turned out it was in primo condition, as if whoever'd been living there had just taken off with a few clothes and some food, boarding everything over before they left, and then never came back. Monty and Batrix figured later that that's exactly what had happened, the people had decided to leave in the first hours of the War and boarded it all up before they left to keep people from breaking in so there'd be something to come back to, only they never made it back again. We discovered other buildings down in that area like that – a lot of Wilshire was like islands in the midst of the fire, I'm not sure why. Fire's weird – it'll sweep through an area and burn down big concrete warehouses and leave small frame houses that look like they'd fly to kindling if you sneezed hard anywhere nearby without a mark on them, and that seems to be what happened there. Anyway, we found a whole bunch of stuff in that condo and its neighbors, including this tiger-skin rug. I asked Batrix if I could have it, and she said yes, nobody else spoke up for it before then. So I carried it back here on the back of my horse, and Monty kept it for me at his place because I didn't have room for it in my dorm room – we laid it out on the floor of his front room, sort of a conversation piece,” he said, smiling faintly, his eyes a little unfocused, his mind on past pleasures.

“Ever make love on it with anybody?” Leroy asked him impishly.

“Leroy!” Leah exclaimed.

“Well, people do that,” Leroy told her, trying to keep a straight face and failing catastrophically, a wicked grin spreading across his face as he said, “There's this book down in the library, *A Weekend in Paradise*, by –”

“An' how did you come to be readin' that'n, young man?” Monty asked him, trying to look stern and not succeeding. “That's not for minors, you know.”

“I know. I sort of borrowed it under the table when I worked down there a while as a shelver.”

“Oh. Uh, well, anyways, you an' Paul can take that matter up later on – for a while yet, though, mebbe we oughtta put that whole conversation on the back burner, what do you think?”

“Okay, Daddy, I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, son, it's okay,” Monty told him, reaching out to ruffle the boy's short, tightly-curved hair. “You just take after your ol' man, that's all,” he said, and then both of them were grinning, Monty picking the boy up and giving him a vast hug.

“Lord, it's getting late,” I said, looking up at the wall-clock Paul had mounted above the bed. “Shouldn't we call it a night and turn in now?”

“Can I stay up a while and look at *Totally MAD* and listen to the CDs Paul gave me, Daddy?” Leroy asked.

“Long as you get enough sleep, I don't care – what time do you have to start your card-runs?” Monty asked him.

“No particular time. What I'm supposed to do tomorrow is to summarize my data for the last few days and email it to La Tenebra. I can sleep way in if I want, and still get that done.”

“Okay, you go ahead, Leroy. I'm kinda tired, myself, an' your Mom seems to be, too. We'll go take our shower an' hit the rack now. You go ahead an' enjoy yourself. – Lord, I'd better start thinkin' what I'd like to get you for your birthday, myself!

“– Hon'?” he said, turning to me.

“Hmm?”

“Ready to turn in now?” he asked me, as, stooping down, he picked me up in his arms again.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked him, smiling. “– Yes, I'm getting sleepy. Let's go take that shower.”

“Okay. – G'night, kids. Will you an' Leah be in with us later, Paul?”

“Yeah, in a bit. Want to make sure everything's shipshape in here, first,” he said, helping Leah tug the blankets on their bed into place and smooth them out.

“Okay, we'll be waiting for you. – Good night, Leroy,” he said, coming over with me on his arm to where Leroy stood. Bending down, he gave Leroy a kiss on the forehead; Leroy kissed him back. Then, as Monty lowered his arm so that I was at eye-level with Leroy, he gave me a kiss, as well.

Later, in bed together, Leah and Paul having finally fallen asleep next to us, in spite of our protests of sleepiness Monty and I talked for a little while about the things Paul had described to me earlier concerning his encounter up on the cliff-tops.

“Was it real, do you think?” I asked Monty.

“Hon’, it was real enough for Paul – you yourself remarked at the changes in him, an’ there was more you don’t know about yet. Whatever it was really happened up there, it was real enough to leave scars on ‘im an’ make him one thoroughly changed young man – changed in the best possible ways, as I reckon it. If’n this be insanity, let us make the most of it,” he said with a grin.

“I can only agree. He really is changed – he seems so much . . . bigger. Older. Stronger, somehow. Not so much physically, oh, there is that, of course, but mentally. Spiritually. The will – he’s finally found his focus, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah, I’d have to say so. His vision. His True Will. You can hear it in his voice, see it in his walk. An’ I won’t worry any more about the possibility o’ his tryin’ to check out again. He seems to have embraced Life itself, with a capital L, with ever’tthin’ he has.”

“What about Sneaky Rat? Do you think he was real? Or was he just something out of Paul’s own mind?”

“Sweetheart, don’t say ‘just.’ Regardless o’ where Sneaky Rat really come from, anythin’ that could make the sort o’ changes in Paul that that . . . experience did is nothin’ mere. It’s somethin’ to stand back in awe of. An’ remember that cougar Paul brought back? That was definitely real. The Science boys’re runnin’ around like chickens with their heads cut off down there, havin’ all sorts o’ fits over the thing. You know what the latest thing they found out about it is?”

“What?”

“They finally decided to do a genetic assay on it. Turns out it don’t have cat genes. It don’t even have mammalian genes. Are you ready for this’n?”

“?”

“They told me the closest thing they know of to its genotype is that of a bird, can you beat that?”

Chills went raced up my back as I remembered, from my dear, dead college days, how closely related birds and dinosaurs were. “Well, we sure can’t buck science, can we? Okay, it was real. The votes aren’t all in yet on what kind of real it was, but it was real enough, like you say. – Darling?”

“What?”

“Ever tell you how much I love you?” I told him, leaning forward to kiss him.

“Not since the last time, woman,” he told me, putting his arms around me, pulling me close to him, surrounding me with his love as the two of us drifted together into slumber.

## **Chapter 16: Coda**

*Dawn had been dead for one month.*

*Slowly, keeping her face turned resolutely into the oncoming winds, not daring to look back lest she lose all her resolve and turn back to rejoin her beloved mate Yip and her spirit-father Dawn in death, Para began to lead her people away from the university, out onto the meadow along its eastern flank, and, from there, to the forest that lay somewhere beyond, to the east.*

*Kilimanjaro’s birth in tectonic upheaval and fountains of blazing rock still lay long megayears in the future.*

*The world turned again and again in the ancient rhythms of night and day, season and season. A year went by. Two. The last bits of Dawn’s mortal remains were finally gone, removed by tireless corpse-beetles and other scavengers, nothing more remaining of him than a fading stain on the gorgeous tessellated floors of what had once been the great library of a university campus.*

*Out in the courtyard below the library, a rugged little plant whose descendants would someday be called roses by the beings descended from Para’s people, whose lineage would never have produced further fruit if not for their legendary foster-father, Dawn, lost foliage to the wind. It didn’t mind – the soil in which it was rooted was full of nutrients and the hordes of bacteria and invertebrates that kept it fertile, the frequent warm rains were gentle, the semitropical sunlight was kind. Though it could not then have known it, it and all the rest of Earth’s children had all of forever to look forward to.*

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Some preliminary notes are in order here.

In what follows, to reduce confusion, male members of Dawn's species are called "men," female members are called "women," and their offspring are referred to as "children," "grandchildren," etc. as appropriate. Kin are referred to, in terms of lineage relationships, by the same labels we normally use to refer to our kin: son, daughter, mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, aunt, uncle, grandfather, grandmother, etc.

For similar reasons, as far as the weights and measures used by Dawn's civilization go, in most cases, aside from the measurement of time, the units of measurement are taken either from the traditional English system of weights and measures – inches, feet, miles, pounds, etc. – or the metric system used by our scientists, and are not necessarily identical to the corresponding units in used Dawn's time and culture (that is, for example, our mile might come close to one of the units of linear measure used in Dawn's culture, but is almost certainly not identical to it). One exception to this is the measurement of temperature, as discussed below in endnote 11.

It should be mentioned here that Dawn's people used a base-8 rather than a base-10 numbering system, probably because they had four digits on each hand, rather than the five that are standard for modern mammals, including us. When numbers are given in that portion of the above narrative that concerns Dawn's own experiences, it should be assumed that they are given in base-8 notation, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>Eastern Gond: Africa. By the end of the Cretaceous Period of the Mesozoic, Africa and South America, once, like Australia, Antarctica, and India, neighboring parts of the giant supercontinent Gondwana, had been rifted apart into separate continents. Thus Western Gond was South America, Eastern Gond was Africa.

<sup>3</sup>Malagasy: The giant island that would someday be known by humans as Madagascar.

<sup>4</sup>North Sandstone: North America. Dawn's people named this continent "North Sandstone" because of the resemblance of certain Devonian-age sandstone beds on that continent and the fossils they contained to similar fossil beds found in Europe, their continent of origin, which they called Laur. These beds were brick-red in color, hence the name "Old Red Sandstone." The first colonization parties that came to North America from Europe discovered some of these fossil beds not far from their settlements, and named their newfound land after them.

<sup>5</sup>Red-Eye: Mars.

<sup>6</sup>Big Stripes: Jupiter.

<sup>7</sup>The Golden One: Saturn.

<sup>8</sup>Sky-Maiden: Uranus.

<sup>9</sup>Blue-Water: Neptune.

<sup>10</sup>I.e., four time-divisions after midnight. A time-division in Dawn's culture was one-twelfth of a day (midnight-to-midnight or noon-to-noon), a little less than two of our hours (because their day was slightly shorter than ours, as discussed below), in a fashion similar to that of the Japanese and Chinese division of the day, each such section having its own astrological ruler. Six time-divisions would be a half day, so four time-divisions would comprise two-thirds of a half day, corresponding roughly to eight of our hours. Thus on average, "4 a.m." for Dawn's culture would correspond to 8 a.m. in ours, the actual time as measured from midnight varying as to season, when the Sun would have been well up even in moderately high latitudes and/or in late Autumn, Winter, or early Spring. Beyond that, each two-hour section of the day was further divided into  $120_{10} = 170_8$  "minutes," each "minute" comprising  $60_{10} = 74_8$  "seconds" (cf. note 20, below, for an explanation of the base-8 numbering system used by Dawn's civilization).



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Nota bene: These “hours” were not all the same length. Their length, and thus the lengths of the “minutes” and “seconds” into which they were divided, varied in size depending on the season and the “decanate” of that season. For example, the Twelfth (two-“hour” period) of Dawn (the time of day, not the name) at the Summer Solstice was far greater than the Twelfth of Dawn at the Winter Solstice, thanks to the variation in the day-vs.-night lengths of those times of year. By the time of the Event, thanks to North Sandstone innovation and technological momentum, electronic pocket calendars and time-pieces of the sort possessed by Sneaky Rat by then calculated all that for the user, making it easy to see at a glance what month, day, Twelfth, etc. it was without having to go through all those calculations.

Also, rather than being measured from dawn-to-dawn or sunset-to-sunset, with the dawn “hour” straddling the moment of dawn and the “hour” of sunset straddling the moment of sunset, as is true of Far Eastern time-divisions of the Late Holocene, in Dawn’s culture the day was measured midnight-to-midnight or noon-to-noon. The first “hour” of the day thus began at midnight, its last “hour” ending at midnight of the next day, making it easier to standardize time divisions, especially for legal and military purposes. From midnight to noon was the antemeridian (a.m.) period, comprising the first six “hours” of the day, beginning with 00:00:00 and ending at 05:167:73<sub>8</sub> “hours” a.m. (noon, with the Sun on the meridian). The postmeridian (p.m.) period, comprising the “hours” from noon to midnight, again began with 0:000:00 (high noon) and ended at 05:167:73<sub>8</sub> “hours,” with the Sun on the antimeridian, or due north.

In Dawn’s time, there were more days in the year than there are now, due to the fact that the Earth spun slightly faster on its axis than it does now, making the days shorter than ours. Tidal drag on our world from our Moon has since slowed down Earth’s rotation, so that we have fewer days in our year than Dawn’s people did. Our year now is 365.256 days long (366.25 sidereal days, measured as the span of time between two risings of the same star), with a rotation period, or day, 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 4 seconds long. Our Gregorian calendar observes a year 365 days long, so every four years (with some exceptions, to account for the fact that our year is a little more than 365.25 days long), we tack on an extra day to our month of February. In Dawn’s time, there were 371.42 days in a year, and the days, as measured in our terms, were 23 hours, 32 minutes, 14.04 seconds long. With exactly 93 days in each season, their solar calendar year had 372 days in it. To correct for the fact that this made each year 13 hours, 55 minutes, 12 seconds too long, every so many years one day was subtracted from the last month of the year according to a formula that spread the corrections out over centuries and even millennia. This formula was determined scientifically by North Sandstone astronomers around their year 5,025, as dated from the martyrdom of the prophet of their dominant religion; in the decade following that year, a drastic calendar-reform took place, after which the modern version of the calendar, described above, became the law of the land.

Prior to that time there were no lag-years (years with one less day), each calendar year being exactly 372 days in length, and the start of each season slipped farther and farther back until the calendrical start of Spring was somewhere in the early part of Winter. To correct for that, every so often Parliamentary Edicts were issued according to which so many days would be added to a given year, making a great nuisance for everyone.

<sup>11</sup>A very logical way to measure temperature for any budding technological culture is to divide up the difference between the freezing and boiling points of water by whatever numerical base that culture uses, or by a power of that base. Thus our Celsius system of measurement of temperature divides the interval between the freezing and boiling points of water into  $10^2 = 100$  degrees, with the freezing point of water arbitrarily set at  $0^\circ$  and that of water’s boiling-point at  $100^\circ$ . Because Dawn’s species’ numerical system used base-8 rather than our base-10, they divided the interval between the freezing and boiling points of water into  $8^2 = 64$  units, such that each one of their temperature-units was equivalent to  $1.5625^\circ$  Centigrade (Celsius); and like our scientists, they set the freezing point of water at  $0^\circ$ , so that its boiling-point was  $100_8^\circ$ . Hence, e.g.,  $28^\circ$  above zero in Dawn’s civilization’s system is equal to  $43.75^\circ$  Celsius =  $110.75^\circ$  Fahrenheit.

<sup>12</sup>Dromanity: Dawn’s species were descended from dromaeosaurs, the same clade of theropod dinosaurs from which birds evolved, for more on which see below. The term is used to mean much the same thing we mean by “humanity.”

<sup>13</sup>Ocean-of-the-Sunrise: The Atlantic Ocean.

<sup>14</sup>Laur: Europe, as it was in the Cretaceous.

<sup>15</sup>Tethyan Seaway: During the Cretaceous, the ancient continent of Pangaea had long since rifted into several much smaller continents, dividing Gondwana, the great southern supercontinent comprising Africa, Australia, Antarctica, and India, from Laurussia (North America, Eurasia, and Siberia) on a more or less east-west bisector; and further dividing Africa from South America and North America from Eurasia/Siberia along a more or less north-south bisector. This process, which began at the end of the Permian Period of the Paleozoic Era, was pretty much complete by the time of the End-Cretaceous (Cretaceous-Tertiary, or K-T) Event. These divisions thereby created a broad seaway, the Tethys, that ran completely around the globe on the southern borders of North America and Eurasia, and the northern borders of South America and Africa, and connected the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean and what would someday be the Indian Ocean. Because of this unobstructed passageway among all the continents and its moderating effect on climate, the Cretaceous was generally blessed with warm or even hot climates everywhere, only land at extreme northern and southern latitudes having harsh winters. However, because the Tethys connected up all the world's oceans, much of the damage from the K-T Event was spread rapidly throughout the planet, considerably adding to its impact on Earth's life. In similar wise, and to a much greater degree, whatever brought about the great extinctions of the Permo-Triassic horizons must have been magnified enormously by the fact that at that time, a quarter of a billion years ago, there was but one great continent, Pangaea, and one great world ocean, Panthalassa, with few or no buffers of land or sea to damp down the effects of the cause of those extinctions.

<sup>16</sup>The Bight of Summer Winds: The shoreline of a shallow sea that covered a good deal of what became the southernmost states of the old USA, including most of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee, reaching far up into Kentucky, and even covering a good deal of western Georgia and the Carolinas and some of eastern Texas. That was not so much an arc of the sort that makes up the shoreline of today's Gulf of Mexico, but a deep intrusion with two major sections: one, running far up into Kentucky, having an eastward-tending cant; the other, oriented southeast-northwest, protruding well into what is now Mexico. This incursion of the Gulf of Mexico well into the heartland of North America left Florida more or less intact, however, and the rest of the continent was similar enough to today's North America that it could be recognized as such from its general outlines and its position relative to the other continents.

<sup>17</sup>The Southern Tongue: Those parts of North Sandstone extending southward almost, but not quite, to the continent of South America.

<sup>18</sup>Ocean-of-the-Sunset: The Pacific Ocean.

<sup>19</sup>Siberus: Siberia and Asia combined.

<sup>20</sup>As previously mentioned, Dawn's people used a base-8 numbering system. Hence, translating from base-8 to base-10 numeration, the end of the Permian was  $5 \times (8)^9 = 8^9 + 3 \times 8^8 + 8^6 + 5 \times 8^5 + 6 \times 8^4 + 8^2 = 185,000,000_{10}$  years before the end of the Cretaceous. In Dawn's people's base-8 terminology, this would equate to around five billion (five thousand million =  $5 \times 10_8^9$ ) years. And so on. Remember, when in the preceding narrative it is told from Dawn's point of view, all numbers are in base-8 notation. Thus,  $10 = 10_8 = 8_{10}$ , and all greater quantities are given in the form  $a_0 \cdot x^0 + a_1 \cdot x^1 + a_2 \cdot x^2 + a_3 \cdot x^3 + \dots + a_n \cdot x^n$ , where each  $a_i \in \{0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7\}$  and  $x = 8_{10}$ . For this reason the ages given for various geological periods and eras may seem much too long, but are seen to be otherwise when the values given in the narrative are rendered from base-8 to base-10 notation. In line with that, it should be remembered that when the number "10" appears in the narrative, it is actually  $10_8 = 8_{10}$ .

Thus the Permo-Triassic Event, which closed out the Paleozoic and initiated the Mesozoic Era of Earthly life, took place  $186,000,000_{10} = 1 \times 8^9 + 3 \times 8^8 + 5 \times 8^6 + 4 \times 8^5 + 2 \times 8^4 + 1 \times 8^3 + 2 \times 8^2 = 1,305,421,200_8$  years before Dawn's time. One and a half billion years (in base-8 notation) is a good approximation of that interval.

<sup>21</sup>Transantarctos: Antarctica and Australia combined. During the Cretaceous, like the modern continent of Antarctica, Transantarctos actually covered the Earth's southern pole of rotation, in many places extending thousands of miles beyond it. For that reason, during Winter in the Southern Hemisphere, in many places temperatures dropped to those typical of a New England Winter in our time, or became even colder. Since, due to the mitigating influence of the great Tethys Seaway, which linked the young Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean, completely separating North America from South America and Africa from Eurasia, temperatures were mild to hot almost everywhere else on Earth, even close to the Arctic Circle, Transantarctos boasted – if that is the word – the coldest temperatures on Earth during the Cretaceous. So references to extreme cold temperatures among Dawn's people were made in terms either of Transantarctos, shadowed portions of Earth's Moon, outer space far from any star, or the bottommost parts of their idea of Hell, the realm to which traitors were banished, but not to the Arctic area, which rarely, if ever, was plunged into the deep-freeze conditions holding in the inland regions of Transantarctos during Southern Hemisphere Winter.

<sup>22</sup>264° (of arc): Remember that all numbers given in the text are as calculated in base-8 notation. Thus  $264_8^\circ = 2 \times 8^2 + 6 \times 8^1 + 4 \times 8^0 = 2 \times 64 + 48 + 4 = 128 + 48 + 4 = 180_{10}^\circ$ .

<sup>23</sup>I.e.,  $100,000,000_8 = 8^8 = 16,777,216_{10} = \sim 20$  million years in base-10 notation.

<sup>24</sup>The runaway greenhouse event that turned Venus into a permanent hothouse took place about 800 million years ago (base-10 notation), 740 million years before Dawn's time. In base-8 notation, this would be  $7.4 \times 10^8$  years, in base-10 notation, before Dawn's time. Translated into base-8 notation,  $7.4 \times 10^8$  years =  $5 \times 8^9 + 4 \times 8^8 + 6 \times 8^6 + 7 \times 8^5 + 4 \times 8^2 = 5,406,700,400_8$  years.

<sup>25</sup>Deccan: India. Originally India was part of Gondwana, the giant supercontinent comprising South America, Africa, Antarctica, Australia, and numerous smaller land-masses, including India. Around a quarter of a billion years ago, at the end of the Permian Period, Pangaea, the giant hypercontinent which comprised all major land-masses in the world, began to split up, dividing into Gondwana, the great southern supercontinent, and Laurussia, the great northern supercontinent including North America, Europe, and Siberia. These two giant continents then further divided, as described in endnote 15 to this part of Book 4 of Volume 1 of Dragon Drive, above. India broke away from Gondwana not long after the End-Permian Event, and, now an island continent all on its own, began moving northward, toward Laurasia, i.e., the land that was evolving into the continent of Eurasia. By the end of the Cretaceous, India was sitting just slightly south of the equator; she would not reach her present position, docked up against Eurasia, for tens of millions of years. In the time of Dawn's great-great-grandparents, Deccan, isolated and explored by but a handful of people, was still regarded as terra incognita, but by Dawn's day numerous scientific expeditions mounted from North Sandstone, Laur, and Siberus had carried out a host of paleontological and geological explorations of the island continent, and it was to such expedition that Red, the captain of the launch that became Dawn's haven from the murderous post-Event weather, was referring.

<sup>26</sup>“ . . . a part of Transantarctos that was close to the South Pole back then”: I.e., in that part of Gondwana, the great southern supercontinent, that would someday become the modern Antarctica. At the end of the Permian, that land was very close to the South Pole. See endnote 19, above.

<sup>27</sup>I.e.,  $40,000,000,000_8 = 4 \times 8^{10} = 4 \times 1,073,741,824_{10} = 4,294,967,296_{10} = \sim 4$  billion years in base-10 notation, a little less than the age of the Earth, which is around  $4.5 \times 10^9$  years in base-10 notation (the little detail that the Earth was 65 megayears younger in Dawn's time than it is now doesn't do much to alter that calculation, since the first date differs from the second by an amount that is nearly two orders of magnitude smaller than either, and can thereby be ignored). – CGR

<sup>28</sup>It is time to say something here about the physiological and other features of the members of Dawn's species, as well as related evolutionary considerations.

Dawn's species was descended from dromaeosaurs, a type of theropod dinosaur, and in many respects had the physiology and neurology of their cousins the birds, though with some exceptions, as discussed below.

In height, the men of Dawn's species averaged around 7' tall, the women around 6' 6". They had three fingers and an opposable thumb on each hand, and four toes, including a very large big toe, on each foot. They were plantigrade walkers, like humans, and bipedal in stance.

Modern birds, like their theropod antecedents, do not urinate as mammals do. Instead, they excrete a minimum of water in their feces, and voiding through the same cloacal opening through which reproduction took place. However, early on Dawn's lineage somehow evolved separate reproductive and excretory systems, and further separated the voiding of wastes into two systems: one, a colon through which solid wastes were excreted via an anus, and two, a bladder, ureters, and urethra through which liquid wastes were excreted, either through the male intromittent organ or an opening just off the female's vagina. In addition, they also developed sweat-glands, which secreted some uric acid along with water. With the exclusion of the sweat-glands, which appear only in glabrous species such as the hominidae, this is a system common to all modern mammals. The reasons for this evolutionary development are still not clear, but, as in all such cases of critical variance from an ancestral species of this sort, there had to have been some strong selective advantage in doing so, else the lineage would probably have ceased to exist early on, competed out of business by its cousins, or simply hammered flat by general environmental factors. The voiding of liquid wastes and the production of sweat are costly and inefficient, physiologically speaking. From the beginning, dinosaurs, which first came into existence in the pitilessly hot and arid Triassic, fantastically efficient at conserving water within their bodies. Why this efficiency would have been sacrificed by any of their descendants, and what benefits would have been gained thereby, still is not known; several lines of research are now being done on this subject.

In place of head- and body hair the members of Dawn's species had feathers, but, save on a microscopic level, the structure of those feathers was so similar to that of mammalian hair that they might as well have been hairs themselves. Both sexes had such "hair" on their heads, in the armpits, around the genitalia, and in the form of eyebrows and eyelashes, for much the same reason that mammals in general and humans in particular do, as scent-traps, boosters of tactile sensitivity, adornment, some protection from the weather, etc. Like *Homo sapiens*, however, in areas of their bodies other than the aforementioned ones, their "hair" was sparse and their skins glabrous – again for much the same reasons that are true of us.

In place of a larynx, like birds they had a syrinx. As a result, while they could make all the sounds we do, they could also produce a range of sounds outside ours, much as birds can. In addition to regular speech, they sang – often superbly – and most were capable of the coloratura production of sung chords and a vast range of octaves. Early in their evolution they developed "click-speech" much like that of the Khoisan peoples of Africa, for much the same reason (clicks are far less likely to startle and scare off game than is spoken or shouted speech). It is even possible that among them were talented people who, like modern Superb Lyrebirds, could reproduce almost any sound, including those made by natural events as well as machines, combining it with others to produce music unlike any known to us today.

In line with their greater height than ours, both sexes were more robust than we are, with thicker walls of long muscles and somewhat thicker layers of subcutaneous fat. For that reason they could tolerate lower temperatures, for longer periods, than we can, though their margin of survival in that respect didn't exceed ours by much. Their tolerance of hot weather was on average greater than ours, variations from the norm depending upon where they grew up and their more recent ancestors came from, because of the various heat-exchange mechanisms of their bodies. They sweated, like we do, something they evolved after diverging from the ancestral theropod line; and, of course, early on in their evolution they developed tools, including such things as hand-held fans (palm-fronds), shelters open to the winds, and others which helped to keep them cool in hot weather. They had always been swimmers, as well, enjoying a cool dip in a pool or stream as much as many mammals, including ourselves, do. But they generally preferred warmer temperatures than we do, and did not do as well in colder climes as we do.

Dawn's species was viviparous, giving birth to live infants rather than laying eggs that then hatched out. Somehow, some five million of our years before, alone of all non-marine archosaurs, that trait had appeared among the lineage of dromaeosaurs that ultimately produced them, along with their separate excretory and reproductive systems. However, their women did not lactate and did not have breasts like mammalian females. Instead, they either regurgitated semi-digested food from their crops into the mouths of

their infants, their original way of feeding their babies; hired the equivalent of a wet-nurse to do so for them; or (a very recent innovation, relative to Dawn's time) used pre-prepared formulas analogous to those used today by human females who for whatever reasons do not breast-feed their own young.

Their skin was true skin, like that of birds who have been defeathered, rather than scaled, like that of modern reptiles. Their eyes were large, and could see every color we can as well as slightly farther into both ends of the spectrum, the near-infrared and the near-ultraviolet. Their brains were somewhat larger than ours, with the avian equivalent of well-developed frontal lobes and large cerebral cortexes. Their reflexes tended to be quicker than ours, their hearing somewhat sharper, but their sense of smell wasn't quite as keen as ours, and nothing like that of a champion scenter such as a modern bloodhound. Their sense of taste was at least as good as ours, however, and that combined with their modest sense of smell gave them as sophisticated a palate as we have.

Like birds, members of Dawn's species had a wide range of body- and "hair"-coloration. Skin color could be anything from ivory- or even snow-white, any of the three primary (blue, yellow, red) and three secondary (green, orange, purple) colors, or more subtle shades of color (e.g., magenta, turquoise, aquamarine, electric pink, etc.), to a wide range of gray, to jet-black. The same was true of the color of the hair-like feathers on their heads and bodies. A given individual could have skin of any of these colors, combined with feathers of the same or any other color. Usually, in the same individual the color of his or her feathers differed from skin-color, and the skin was usually patterned ("detailed") in a different color than that of its basic background color. For example, a typical "race" might have had jet-black skin patterned in paisleys of bright crimson, and cobalt-blue "hair."

The typical adult had more teeth than we do, 40 in all, twenty in each jaw, including 8 incisors, four upper and four lower ones, in front; eyeteeth like those of a wolf right behind, four in all, two upper and two lower; bicuspid, two upper and two lower, behind those; and 26 molars, or grinding teeth, behind all the rest. The arrangement of their teeth was thus much like ours save for the extra molars. Though this species descended from carnivorous ancestors, it was omnivorous, at least enough to supplement their otherwise exclusively carnivorous diet with fruits, nuts, some roots, some herbs, and, occasionally, grains. Other than fruits, they did not like sweets much; they used honey and other sources of concentrated sugar mainly as a food preservative and an accent to special meals. They liked to salt their food, but used only sea-salt for that purpose; before the modern era, sea-salt had enormous monetary value, a literal king's ransom including at most about ten pounds of the stuff, because, in addition to its use as a seasoning and dietary supplement, salt was then, as it remains for us now, as well, an extremely powerful antiseptic and antibiotic.

Nutrition: Dawn's "primitive" theropod ancestors ate meat, fruit, and nuts. Dawn's people ate fruit, nuts, fermented mash (who says beer's not a food?!), some sweets (nuts and fruits bound together with honey-like sugar paste), salad (finely chopped vegetables, fruit, and meat resembling the contents of the stomachs of the animals which those ancestors gobbled up raw), meat (both raw and cooked, from fish, mammals, herbivorous dinosaurs, reptiles, birds, etc.), and products made from the milk of mammals kept by stock-breeders for use as dairy animals.

The dominant side of Dawn's species' cerebrum was the right side; most members of his species were left-handed.

Finally, when it came to sexuality and marriage customs, Dawn's people weren't that different from us. Marriages apparently began with the wedding of one woman and one man, who then became the head of a family unit resembling what Robert Anson Heinlein, in his novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966 e.v.), called a "line marriage." Such a family group is a subspecies of a group marriage or circle marriage, is a form of in which more than one man and more than one woman together form a family unit, with all the members of the group marriage being considered to be married to all the other members of the group marriage, and all members of the marriage share parental responsibility for any children arising from the marriage. **Line marriage** is a form of group marriage in which the family unit continues to add new spouses of both sexes over time so that the marriage does not end. In the case of the customs in which Dawn was raised, the senior (first-born) children of a lineage were expected to found line marriages with a first-born of the opposite sex and comparable age; that family group could then go on as long as new partners could be found to join it. Since old, well-established line marriages were often wealthy, thanks to the experience and training of their founding members and the care with which the founders chose prospective new members of the line, becoming a member of such a line marriage was an attractive proposition, and the best and greatest line marriages often lasted many centuries, by our reckoning of time.

Other societies, cultures, and nations often had other marriage customs, but line marriages was very stable, and ensured that the death of one adult member did not leave any children true orphans, so few if any cultures actually banned them.

As far as sexuality went, there are hints in Dawn's story that male and female homosexual bonds were not only not unknown, but were accepted, at least within group marriages and betrothals before marriage, and that Dawn himself had had male lovers in his time. This is not surprising, as homosexual behavior and bonding is common among many species of birds and mammals – and birds were among Dawn's species' closest kin, genetically speaking. Thus a man's co-husbands could also be his sexual partners, and the same was true of women and their co-wives. This could have served to strengthen the affection that co-husbands felt for a man's children, and co-wives for a woman's children, lessening the likelihood that those children would be mistreated by a co-spouse, especially in the event of a man's or a woman's death. Beyond this, not much is known about the various sexual and marriage customs of Dawn's species.

<sup>29</sup>Everywhere the name which communities of members of Dawn's species gave to themselves pretty much meant "the True People." In earliest times, people not of their community but of the same species were referred to by terms which, though couched in different languages depending on location, meant "The Stranger" or "The True Enemy," but as each early community spread out and became acquainted with more and more other communities of their species, specific terms for each of those other communities came into vogue. Usually,\* in the case of a given community, this was the name by which it had always called itself in its own language, the translation of which was, of course, "The True People." Male members of one's own community were called "men" and female members, "women," their young "children," or terms meaning essentially the same things; men, women, and children of other communities with which a given community had established beneficial relations were pretty much called the same, but members of hostile communities, or those on which the given community had made slave-raids and that sort of thing, were called by terms which were the equivalent of the contemptuous "buck," "squaw," and "pickaninny" applied by European-derived settlers of North America to non-whites. A great many wars and riots got started by such name-calling – sound familiar?

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\*But not always, depending upon prior experience with a particular community, positive or negative. In the cases in which such experience was generally negative, terms which originally meant such things as "Those Assholes" and "Those Cheese-Eating Surrender-Monkeys From East Laur" came to be used for them; in the case of communities experienced by others in generally positive ways, typical terms such as "Boy Do Their Women Have Gorgeous Booties," "Wealthiest and Most Hospitable Hosts for 500 Miles Around," and "Nicest Beaches for a Vacation We've Ever Seen" were used. These terms thus became so frequently associated with certain communities that finally everyone, including those communities themselves, came to use contracted forms of such phrases as official names for them.

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<sup>30</sup>Chris de Burgh, "The Lady in Red" (© copyright 1991 by Chris de Burgh):

<sup>31</sup>"There's a New Star up in Heaven Tonight." Written by Chris de Burgh; published by Rondor Music Ltd., London; produced by Chris de Burgh and Peter Oxendale.

<sup>32</sup>Northern and Southern Austral: I.e., Australia and Antarctica. At the end of the Permian the great southern continent, which Dawn's people named Transantarctos, was part of the far larger supercontinent known as Gondwana. Breaking away from Gondwana after the End-Permian Event, it split up into these two modern continents during the Neogene (26-5 million years ago). The two continents thus formed gradually took up their modern positions as time went by.

In turn, during Earth's Paleozoic Era, Gondwana was part of an even larger supercontinent, Pangaea, comprising all of what would eventually become the modern continents. After the close of the Permian Period and inception of the Triassic, 250 million years ago, the northern portion of Pangaea, Laurasia, split

away from Gondwana and, moving north, eventually broke up into a western portion, which became North America, and an eastern portion, which became the modern landmass of Eurasia. Gondwana ultimately split into four continental masses: South America, Africa, India, and the great southern continent, which last split into Australia and Antarctica (see note 21, above). After splitting off from Gondwana and moving north, India remained a giant island continent until it finally collided with the southern boundary of Eurasia, which occurred during the Plio-Pleistocene Epoch, around 5 million years ago. South America, moving northwestward from its birthplace, took up its present position about 2-3 million years ago.

In Dawn's time, though the exact shapes and positions of the continents weren't those of today, they were much closer to the familiar modern patterns than they had been at the close of the Paleozoic. While at that time North America was separated from South America by a considerable gap, the shapes of the two continents were similar to their modern ones, and relatively close to each other, only a narrow belt of ocean separating them. Africa and India hadn't yet collided with Eurasia – that would take until the Pliocene, 5-3 million years ago – but Africa was very close to Eurasia by then. Australia and Antarctica were massed together into the great southern continent, which covered the south pole and had much the same shape and relation to the other continents as Antarctica by itself does today.

The one great physical difference between our world and Dawn's was the presence in his world of the aforementioned Tethyan Seaway, the broad belt of shallow ocean between Eurasia and Africa communicating with both the Pacific and the nascent Atlantic Oceans, acting to buffer temperatures everywhere so that they did not fall much below 5°C or rise significantly above 27°C anywhere on Earth. If not for the continuous belt of open waters in Earth's sub-tropical and tropical latitudes, the presence over the south pole of the great southern continent would have rendered Dawn's world much colder than it actually was. Instead, its temperatures were on average much milder than ours – Earth has been in a cooling phase ever since the Cretaceous, but above all since the Pliocene Epoch (5.3-1.8 Myr b.c.e.), when Africa collided with Eurasia, blocking what had previously been the free passage of ocean waters completely around the world at or near the equator. At the same time, South America joined up with North America, further hindering the global circulation of ocean water. Only the circum-Antarctic belt of waters flowing unimpeded between Antarctica and the southern continents remains of what was once a global circulatory system buffering Earth against extreme heating and warming. And because Antarctica is frozen over, most of what that belt circulates is extremely cold water. As concerned as we are now about global warming, it should also be remembered that in her long past, Earth has endured far worse – and someday, long after we are gone, will do so again and again.

<sup>33</sup>That said, one modification should be made in the above, in the case of Africa. At the end of the Cretaceous, as a continent Africa was in more or less its modern form and shape. But it must be remembered that any continental mass can be invaded by an arm of the sea which, overlying much of that continent's lowland area, will obscure the continent's actual shape to the casual observer. This was the case for Africa at the end of the Cretaceous: its eastern half, including everything east and south of western Libya to what is now South Africa, was pretty much what it is today, but Africa's western half included an exposed portion which today includes Morocco, Western Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, and immediately contiguous areas, and a long strip of land including modern Niger, Nigeria, and western Libya that was covered by a shallow sea separating the exposed western lands from the eastern portions of Africa. It was those eastern lands that Dawn's people identified as Eastern Gond.

<sup>34</sup>The Moody Blues, "The Balance," from *A Question of Balance*. Lyrics by Graeme Edge, Music by Ray Thomas. © 1971.

<sup>35</sup>Loren Eiseley, "The Inner Galaxy." In his *The Unexpected Universe* (New York: Harvest/HBJ Books, 1964, 1966, 1968, 1969), p. 177.

<sup>36</sup>For an excellent overview of this sociopolitical phenomenon, see Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997; ISBN 0-609-80222-4).

## **24. Freedom Road:**

### **Miocene Epoch (26-5 Mya BCE)**

The apes that were the ancestor of both chimpanzees and hominids evolved cultures some aspects of which are unique to mammals and, in some cases, to those of hominids and chimps: in the case of mammals, to protect against killing of young by bachelor males seeking to acquire mates of proven fertility; in the case of hominids and robust chimps,<sup>1</sup> to protect females, young, and invalids against psychopaths and cannibals among their own kind. We, their descendants and the heirs of their cultures, give those things up at peril of our total extinction. Yet, when turned outward, against formidable enemies, the same tendencies that produce psychopaths among the robust chimpanzees and hominidae become enormously valuable evolutionary assets, making our branch of Earth's great ape species some of the finest warriors in the universe.

Consider:

Around fifty million years ago, during the Eocene Epoch of the Tertiary Period of Earth's Cenozoic Era, the flying polyps<sup>2</sup> that had been imprisoned by terrestrial colonies of the so-called Great Race of Yithians<sup>3</sup> for billions of years finally rose up and defeated their ancient foes. To escape the wrath of the flying polyps, most of the Yithians then resident on Earth sent the minds of their brightest scientists into the bodies of the intelligent coleopteroid insectoid beings of Earth's post-human, Typhonian-Eon future, circa 5,000 A.D., thus ensuring their own survival, though their former borrowed bodies had been destroyed. Others escaped into space, and eventually returned to re-colonize the Earth for awhile; the first of their new colonies were established around forty million years ago, after the polyps finally died out due to biowarfare plagues the Yithians sowed during the hideous wars that then ensued between the two races. These new Yithian colonies survived and even flourished for awhile, their heyday being the later portions of the Paleogene Period, or mid-Miocene, 30-20 million years ago.

During this period, the Yithians enslaved many Earthly species in their service, inflicting ghastly oppression upon them and not caring about the agony which those slaves endured in their service. Eventually one enslaved species of gigantic, intelligent birds that the Yithians had genengineered into a form having hands rather than wings, despairing of deliverance from their cruel masters in any other way, managed to create their own biowarfare matériel and release it into all but two of the Yithian colonies present on our world at that time. The plagues caused by those pathogens, some of them worse than Ebola and smallpox combined, not only completely wiped out every being in the Yithian colonies into which they had been introduced,<sup>4</sup> but countless species of animal, plant, and fungal life in the regions where the colonies had been established – including the bird-men themselves, whose suffering under the Yithian whip had been so ghastly that they were happy enough to escape into death if it meant taking their sadistic masters with them.

In one of the two colonies that escaped the plague, sited in what is now Borneo, around 20-25 million years ago a group of enslaved great apes, genetically enhanced by bioengineering technology to make them more useful as slaves to their Yithian masters, managed to escape from the colony. Upon their escape, they were able to scour that colony off the face of the Earth with thermonuclear devices they had managed to make themselves, using their master's technology and resources and working in absolute secrecy. These apes, among humanity's primate ancestors, then made their way to eastern Africa via powered launches stolen from their erstwhile masters.

The other Yithian colony, located in Antarctica and thus physically isolated from other colonies, ultimately perished of natural causes rather than of the artificial plagues. Its members had become etiolated, lacking in initiative and courage. Learning via radio of the deaths of their sister colonies elsewhere in the world, they buttoned up tight and prepared to ride it out. Just when they did, great plagues began destroying their food-crops, which the Yithians grew underground in vast, artificially lighted caverns, along with the pinnipeds, birds, and other animal life indigenous to that area. Sic transit gloria Yithii.

Here is the story of those magnificent terrestrial primates and their desperate, ultimately successful bid for freedom.



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*Unintended consequences . . .*

*Take a bar of pure, unalloyed gold bullion. Beat it into a flat sheet on an anvil with a heavy hammer. It is so soft you can almost cut it with a butter knife. A small child, taking one side of the sheet in either hand, can easily tear it in two. Good material for decorating expensive artworks and other artifacts, but the idea of using it for making armor meant to be used in battle is laughable, and as for making a sword out of it, forget it.*

*Now, fold that sheet of gold over on itself and lay the result back on the anvil. Beat it again and again with the hammer until it is once more flat and smooth.*

*Fold it on itself again, and continue beating it with the hammer, over and over again, until it is once more flat and smooth.*

*Continue this process, day in and day out, for weeks, months, even years. The more times that sheet of pure gold is folded over on itself, the harder it is to do it again the next time, until you have to heat it in the forge and manipulate it with tongs to do it again. Each time, after folding it, beat it and beat it with that heavy, heavy stone hammer, making it smooth, spreading it out again for the next folding.*

*After doing this for weeks, months, years, using the molten heat of the forge, work it into the shape of a sword-blade.*

*A sword? Made of pure gold? Only a fool would do such a thing! Soft gold is the stuff of luxury – it can be made into lovely artworks, even into coins. But a sword? You're out of your mind.*

*Sure you are! That golden sword-blade, made entirely of pure gold worked in the way described above, is harder than carbon steel. Laminated back on itself again and again under the remorseless pounding of the smith's hammer, it has crystallized into a material that can defy swords made of Toledo steel, able to cut its way through ironwork the way steel goes through plywood. Depending upon how long pure gold is worked in this way before being made into a knife or sword, it can even scratch diamond.*

*Now, consider the soul of Man, remorselessly hammered and hammered and laminated back upon itself, and again hammered and hammered and folded back upon itself, over and over again, until the very Aeons Themselves lose count of the times and ways it been subjected to the relentless alchemical torture of Tyranny . . .*

\* \* \* \* \*

During the Early Miocene (26-24 Mg Y BCE), a time well into the Neogene portion of the Cenozoic Era of earthly life, but still tens millions of years ago, when the Great Old Ones or one of their satellite species had long since established colonies on our world, a species of great ape lived in Borneo. The apes in question weren't there of their own free will and accord. They were slaves of the Yithians – no, less than slaves, mere property, throw-away appliances, disposed of like trash when they died. When allowed to breed, they produced young prodigiously – something which the Yithians discovered by depriving their property of all pleasures and delights save sex and the begetting of children.

The apes hated their masters, who made escape all but impossible, and the consequences of escape unspeakable. For no crime other than that of being born, the Yithians made the lives of their slaves a Hell fouler than the minds of dedicated psychopaths could dream up. Understandably, the apes constantly plotted and schemed among themselves to escape – aside from sex, it was their greatest pleasure and most loved pastime, save for one: dreaming of an ultimate revenge against the Yithians.

The more intelligent among the apes, realizing that they had to create an edge for themselves in order to have any chance of escaping successfully from captivity, decided that they had better learn the ways of their masters, including the Yithians' spoken and written languages, so they could have a better idea of what opportunities lay open to them for achieving their goal. The apes were genengineered descendants of ordinary pongid apes; they had been given the ability to speak, made truly bipedal in order to make it easier for them to carry out various tasks, had had their brains retailored to make them able to learn and carry out complex tasks assigned by their masters. Over the centuries of their enslavement, their masters had taught them as much of the simpler dialects of the spoken languages of the Yithians as possible, to enable the Yithians to communicate their orders to their slaves as clearly as possible. Starting with that, it took only a

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century or so for the apes, working and teaching one another in secret, to master the spoken versions of High Yithian along with the ancient dialects of the Mi-Go, various scientific languages used by the Yithians, and even the Yithians' liturgical languages (for the Yithians did have their own religions), along with hundreds of simpler languages and dialects used by the Yithians.

However, it took the apes a little longer – a couple of centuries – to learn the written versions of those languages. For the Yithians did not want any of their slaves, the apes included, learning how to read and write their languages, except in a few, rare, individual exceptions (e.g., scientific techs, secretaries, etc.). For if any slaves but a few highly trusted ones, kept segregated from all others, should do so, it would then be but a very short time until the more intelligent of them had acquired all the scientific, technological, and other knowledge and wisdom of the Yithians necessary to overthrow their masters – and do just that. For that reason the direst consequences befell any slaves caught with the Yithians' books, or trying to teach other slaves how to read. The Yithians' veterinarian-torturers were adept at wringing every last atom of pain out of slaves, prolonging their agony as long as possible, keeping slaves alive for months or even years in spite of endless mutilations and maiming that left their patients limbless. In some cases they even turned their victims into bodiless brains floating in jars, kept alive for decades by artificial means, torturing them by application of certain chemicals to their metabolic fluids as well as non-stop electrical stimulation of their pain centers. Far worse than even those horrors, punishment of slaves who had offended the Yithians or broken their masters' laws often involved the long-term torturing of mates and children before the horrified eyes of offenders, tortures that could go on for years, turning the victims into mewling idiots and the devastated onlookers into screaming lunatics before they were allowed the mercy of death.

So the slaves' efforts to learn to read had to be carried out in strictest secrecy, with hideous consequences for all should the diggers be discovered by their masters at their labors. Usually this was done in cave-tunnels dug with painstaking effort over months or years below the festering barracks in which the apes were kept when not at work or being used in their masters' experiments, always at night, by hand. The apes were always kept shackled, always under the watchful eyes of their guards, the sole exception being night-time, when they were locked up tightly in their barracks so they could not escape. Fortunately their guards, as guards so often are, were lazy and not very intelligent brutes, members of a trusted servitor species the Yithians had brought with them from the homeworld,<sup>5</sup> eminently suited for the harsh, cruel work of overseeing the slaves. Once they had locked their charges within their barracks at night, the guards reckoned that they needn't check on the inmates until time to release them for work-gangs or to experimenters in the morning. The apes, they knew, were mere slaves, safe enough in the barracks. So those guards who had currently rotated to the night shift could spend their time on guard-duty playing cards, snacking on goodies found in the nearby jungles, looking at crude pornographic picture-books, or even fornicating with one another in out-of-the-way niches to pass the time away, rather than doing anything more serious about their jobs. Thus, between their guards' and the Yithians' perception of them as mindless lumps of meat, and their own burning, indefatigable drive to build ladders out of their slavery toward freedom and the starry heavens, the apes were able to learn to read their masters' books and come to comprehend their culture and their technology.

Eventually the apes managed to complete several tunnel-systems leading from careful concealed trap-doors in the floors of their barracks to points far removed, some to places beneath the jungle wildlands, others at the very edges of the gleaming alabaster city their Masters had caused to be built for themselves at the center of the great island. Using candles and oil-lamps stolen from their masters to light the underground darkness, working far, far back in the tunnels where no gleam of light could escape and betray them, the apes began to learn to read the Yithians' books, which the apes had stolen from their masters' libraries, surreptitiously scanned from their masters' books on their masters' computers, and otherwise acquired for themselves.

Eventually, within a few decades, using the information thus gleaned through reading as well as from the results of clandestine experiments down in the tunnels using materials likewise stolen from the Yithians, the apes learned how to build their own computers. They set up their own underground electrical systems, powered by blue-boxed power diverted from their masters' electrical systems as well as batteries the apes learned to make from the books, and used these to power their computers and electric lights while working on their clandestine projects in the tunnels.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few apes went into the tunnels at a time. Every so often there would be a surprise barracks inspection and head-count by the beings which the Yithians used as guards, and while the absence of one

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or two of the inmates could be written off to use of the outside latrines,<sup>7</sup> if more than that turned up missing, a hunt would thereby have been triggered that would not end until the barracks had been literally torn to pieces – and the tunnel entrances exposed. It would have been the end of everything the apes were trying to accomplish – and would have initiated a descent into sheer, unspeakable horror for all of them that would not have ended until they were at last allowed to descend into the comforts of Hell, which were paradise compared to the things the veterinarian-torturers<sup>8</sup> would have done to them and all their kin.

Thus it took many years before the apes had, through their secret espionage, acquired enough knowledge to begin making plans to rebel successfully against their masters and escape them once and for all. For one thing, most of the ape slaves in the Yithian colony on Borneo – which was but one of many such then on Earth; the Yithians had colonies everywhere in Earth's tropics, in the northern portions of Africa and South America as well as in Malaysia, the Indian subcontinent, and the southern portions of North America – had become apathetic, passive creatures, barely able to do more than carry out simple orders and then, their work done at the end of the day, trudge back to their barracks, eat the gruel given to them by their guards, and then almost immediately fall into black, dreamless, hopeless sleep. If rebellion was to occur, only a relative handful of the apes, at most about a hundred, would be able to accomplish it. Further, if any of the rest of the slaves got wind of what was up, so brainwashed by their masters had they become, and so anxious to curry favor with the Yithians, that they would surely go to the nearest guard and tattle on their rebellious brethren. So, no matter how much extra time it would add to their efforts, the apes had to do everything in their power to make sure no sign of their project ever got back to either their masters, their guards, or their less ambitious brethren.

Somehow the apes managed the impossible. Sometimes that entailed quietly killing the guy who was bright enough to realize that if he turned you in, he won big-time brownie-points from his owners; such potential problems tended to end up as unfortunate industrial accidents. In a few rare cases it meant killing one or more guards before they could spread the alarm and bring Hell itself down on their heads. No matter what, or what it entailed, even, in a few horrifying cases, murdering their own or a neighbor's child, they managed. They managed.

Oh, yes, they managed.

More: once they had grasped the essentials of the Yithians' sciences, they quickly discovered that the major source of power for the colony was provided by nuclear reactors. The reason that their theft of electrical power from the colony's aboveground electrical grid had gone completely unnoticed all that time was that the reactors provided so much power, so readily, that the Yithians never bothered to monitor their output, and therefore never spotted the minor fluctuations in power caused by the thefts. Such fluctuations were made up within milliseconds by the reactors which, monitored by the great mainframe computers used to supervise them and other high-tech machinery in the colony, would adjust the reactors' control-rods moment by moment to make sure the output was as close to invariant as possible.

And the apes learned what else you could do with the same material that powered those reactors: you could make bombs. Tiny bombs that could gouge vast craters out of the earth and vaporize whatever had been sitting on the land where the crater came to be. Bombs that could, in fact, easily destroy this or any other Yithian colony. Thermonuclear devices that could punch holes right up through Heaven and into the very lap of the Gods, right down through the surface of the Earth and into its mantle and core, into the very lap of the King of Hellspawn. Deliverance in the form of weapons which their most ancient and most beloved Goddess, the Lady of Battles, known to their ancestors' ancestors' ancestors', would have loved.

Singing as they worked for the masters – long ago, within a couple of generations of their endowment with the genes that gave them the ability to talk, these apes had learned how to sing, at first imitating birds and small mammals and insects and the sounds of nature, then making up their own music and adding words to it – the apes found ways to steal what they needed to make three such bombs. Finally, though in the process they had lost some good men (for the apes thought of themselves as men and women) to radiation sickness (the stupid guards had never thought to question the apes when they told the guards that the dead men had died of a common epidemic ailment), they now had what they needed to make their bombs, which they set about assembling down in their secret tunnel-systems beneath their barracks. By now those tunnels, carefully shored up with bunks of timber and whatever else could be found to make sure there were no accidental breakthroughs from above that would expose them to the eyes of other apes or the guards, extended everywhere under the Yithian colony. The apes planned to set those bombs off directly beneath the colony's great Central City, where most of the Yithians lived and worked at all times, calculating that the

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radiation and fallout from the blasts would be more than enough to take care not only of the Yithians themselves, but also all the guards and veterinarian-torturers living on the colony's fringes, as well. Of course, by doing so they would also kill all the apes not in on the project; but, given the lives the other apes "lived," it was probably just as well – and the price they would pay for trading their birthright as intelligent, freedom-loving beings for a mess of gruel. Shit happens, the conspirators told themselves, and indeed, there was no other way to make sure their children and grandchildren and children's children's children would finally live in true freedom – but wept secretly in the night, when they were supposedly at sleep, hating themselves for what they would have to do to their brethren.

And then, at last, the great day came.

They set the bombs to go off when triggered by 30-hour timers, to make sure they would be able to get away in time. Then, emerging from one of the exits from their vast network of tunnels into the jungle several just outside the seaside barracks<sup>9</sup> in which they had been imprisoned, they filed quickly down the short jungle paths to the coast, their women and children accompanying them, all of them carrying books and other treasures they had accumulated and stored up in the tunnels over the long years of their servitude to the Yithians. Upon reaching the sea, using Yithian hydrogen-powered launches they'd stolen and artfully concealed in one of the countless delta bayous of the Borneo swamps during clandestine trips out of the tunnels, spreading thick mud on the decks and roofs of the launches, where they planted lilies and other swamp plants, the apes put out to sea as quickly as possible, making at least 20 knots, wanting to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the colony as they could by the time the bombs went off.

They made it.

There were numerous islands, large and small, in the area around Borneo, which then as now, however much the shape of its coastline differed from what it became in Holocene times, lay beside the Java Sea, off the Indian Ocean. Most of those islands were useless to the Yithians, and consequently had never been occupied by the Yithians, their servitors, or their slaves. It didn't take the apes long to find a large island about a hundred miles south of Borneo whose perimeter, like Borneo's coast, was riddled with countless inlets. Picking one such inlet on the south side of the island, a largish one which they called "Blessed Shield," they piloted their launches some 20 miles up into the island's heart, until they came to the place where the inlet dead-ended in a good-sized swamp. There they tied up as best they could, using the huge mangrove trees that abounded there to tether their launches.

Then they settled themselves in for the day. They had set out from the prison-camp the previous evening, reaching the coast at night-fall, which came around 8 pm – for it was Summer. Then, programming their course on the launches' computers and trusting to the boats' inertial guidance systems, they completed their labors just as dawn broke over the sea. Now, eating a light meal, exhausted – none of them had slept a wink since leaving the colony – they turned in for the day. They hadn't completely camouflaged their boats, but they were so dead tired they hadn't the strength to continue working past dawn. And the rain-forest surrounding the bayou, like the bayou itself, was so thick with trees, provided so liberally with forest canopy even over the waterways, that it was virtually impossible for an observer from outside to spot anything moving beyond that impenetrable green screen. The chance of their being discovered by an observer making a flyover in a Yithian aircraft was vanishingly small. So, ignoring the slight risk of a chance discovery by pursuers, crawling far back into the foliage, sheltering themselves with palm-fronds, they gave themselves up to the all-compelling lure of sleep.

Their gamble paid off. Upon awakening again in the cooling late afternoon, the apes found no sign that the Yithians or their servitors had discovered where they had gone. By now, they were sure, if nothing else, the guards working the barracks, hysterical upon finding so many members of their work-details missing, or even having made a surprise inspection in a barracks and thereby discovering that a vast number of their charges had gone AWOL, would have sounded the alarm, and the hunt for them would be up. The Yithians, or at least their brutish servitors, would probably have discovered the tunnel-systems, too.

But they wouldn't find the bombs. Not in time. Those intricate, deadly little devices had been emplaced in deep cairns in the farthest reaches of the tunnel-complex that had been dug specifically to hold them, the tunnel roofs in those parts of the complex then carefully collapsed to cover the cairns and fill in the tunnels where the cairns had been excavated. The bombs themselves had been carefully covered with great slabs of concrete and thick duraplastic balks to keep them from being crushed when the tunnels in which they sat were brought down; the timers connected to those triggers had been pre-set before the

bombs were concealed, though not yet activated. Only a few tiny wires, coated in plastic so strong it could easily withstand blasts of high explosive, had been left protruding from the edges of those filled-in tunnels, wires that connected to the triggers of the bombs. Via those wires, the conspirators had activated the timers, then had covered the wires with dirt and rocks, making sure that their discovery before the bombs went off would be virtually impossible.

And now the apes waited. And waited. Another eight or nine hours went by, during which the apes figuratively chewed their fingernails down to the elbows. They knew they wouldn't see the fireballs from their island refuge. They had deliberately chosen their island bolt-hole with exactly that in mind, calculating that the horizon as well as intervening jungle, mountains, and ocean would be ample shielding between them and the first, awesome, signs of their ultimate success, which could otherwise blind them and fill their bodies with the seeds of deadly cancers that would finally flower perhaps decades later. But they should be able to see the horrendous pillars of smoke and dust, surrounded by toruses of blazing nitrogen, rising from the blasted land that marked the explosions afterward, for those would rise clear up through the stratosphere, tens of miles above the burning land. If they didn't see those within a short time, they would know that the bombs had been found, and that, unless their Gods blessed them and their luck was great, it would be just a matter of time until they were recaptured and in the hands of the veterinarian-torturers . . .

– And then all their labor and the agony of their fears were rewarded: As Morning was spreading Her cloak of rose-trimmed gold across the sea to the east, another dawn suddenly erupted to the north, a twisting, writhing polychrome serpent of commingled smoke and dust and fire that rose to the heavens, high enough to be seen far beyond the very curve of the world. And the jubilant apes knew that at last they and their hapless kin back in the colony were free of the Yithians.

– But from how many of the Yithians? And for how long?

From all their studies and reading and spying the apes knew that Yithian colonies existed all over the world, a civilization erected and sustained on the back of millions, even billions of chronically terrorized slaves that every day were used up and then, when of no more use to their masters, discarded, so much useless organic junk, in the thousands and tens of thousands. So, after making sure that their boats were so well concealed that there was no way they could be seen from above or even by anything less than thorough, inlet-by-inlet, river-by-river search of the island's waterways by any outsiders, they set up housekeeping in a cave-complex they found not far from their landing site, set into one of the range of low hills that covered the southern edge of the island. Digging still farther back into the caves, they built a system of tunnels resembling those back on Borneo in which they had labored so hard to ferret out all the Yithians' secrets, and there they hid for many months, carefully monitoring the airways for the broadcast shortwave and other radio traffic among Yithian colonies. Having no idea that any of their slaves would ever gain the means to monitor those transmissions – for after all, in their bigotry the Yithians, thinking of their slaves only as mindless, stinking idiots, refused even to consider the possibility that those slaves might have advanced intelligence and the strong wills needed to use them in ways contrary to the wishes of their masters – the Yithians had never thought to encode or scramble such broadcasts, so that those receiving them would have to use special apparatus to be able to understand them, or to use cables or satellites to relay them among the colonies in the form of narrow-beam transmissions that could not be easily hacked into.

Thus the apes learned that over the last few years, many of the Yithian colonies had begun failing precipitously. There had been another successful slave revolt, well before their own – they cheered softly and pumped their fists in the air, crying “You go!”, when they learned this – and this one had involved something much more Farr-reaching than a mere escape or even trashing the colony of their captivity. The members of that revolt, intelligent, wingless birds genengineered from giant wingless, predatory birds that may have been the last remnant population of the 7'-tall Eocene terror-bird *Diatryma*, comely enough that the Yithians employed them as clerks, technicians, and other white-collar workers right in one of their colonial Central Cities, had managed to create some truly nasty biowarfare matériel, bacteria that converted whoever was infected by them into a stinking pile of agonized, rotting – yet still living – meat within a couple of days, viruses whose effects on the infected were like those of black smallpox and Ebola combined, and a number of others even worse.<sup>4</sup> Knowing they would die as well, but unwilling to live any longer in chattel slavery and constant terror of the veterinarian-torturers, those enterprising rebels had infected not only the Yithian colonies in which they were held captive with these ghastly pathogens, but had been able to get to and infect colonies in many other places, as well. The plagues thus engendered ran through

colony after colony, killing every Yithian inhabitant, all their trusted servitors, and most of their slaves living there, as well, then raced through the surrounding countryside, rendering countless animal species extinct and slashing the numbers of most others to dangerously low levels.

While the apes had heard nothing of this before they fled from Borneo, the Yithians resident there had learned of those horrifying plagues from radio communications from other Yithian colonies. Fearing what would happen to them otherwise, they had cut off all contact save that of electromagnetic broadcasts between themselves and the rest of the world. With the destruction of the Borneo colony by the apes' thermonuclear devices, there were now just two Yithian colonies left anywhere on Earth, one in North America, the other in Antarctica. What was left of the colony in North America was already in the throes of the same plagues that had wiped out its sister colonies, and the one in Antarctica wouldn't last much longer. The Antarctic colony had just discovered that botanical epidemics were loose among the crops its slaves grew all year around in huge cave-complexes there, using halide lighting to mimic the light of the Sun. Whatever the cause of those epidemics – ironically, they were probably of natural origin, because there had been no visitors from the outer world to the Antarctic colony since decades before the first artificial plagues began sweeping the world, but you never knew – within a couple of years the Yithians there would be left without food. And so terrified were the Antarcticans of what they had heard about the plagues that had hit the other colonies that they wouldn't leave Antarctica to try to beg or otherwise obtain food elsewhere. And lately the seals and sea-lions abounding on that continent's shores had begun a swift decline in number, nobody quite knew why . . .

The timorous Antarcticans now the sole remaining outpost of Yith left on Earth, the apes decided to make a run for eastern Africa. Large areas of the land there had never been colonized by the Yithians, and were completely empty of the tyrants and all their works. The plagues had therefore probably not affected that area – and even if they had, by now they had almost certainly completely burned themselves out. The Antarcticans, a degenerate branch of the Great Race that had lost everything of the courage, initiative, and pioneering intelligence for which they ancestors had been famous throughout the universe, were no threat to the apes – barring some infernal miracle, within a few years they'd be one with the dust themselves. "Let's go for it!" the apes decided – and set their course, down through the Java, Flores, Banda, and Timor Seas, out into the Indian Ocean, and straight on west to the Promised Land, the eastern coast of Africa.

And as they journeyed west they sang, raised their voices high, high enough to reach the Sun and Moon and Stars above, for the first time unafraid to sing their treasured freedom songs for the whole wide world to hear: "Follow the Southern Stars," a musical map of the heavens and the route to freedom; "Tagal Rowed the Boat Ashore," encouraging one another to keep faith, keep working constantly to reach the lands of freedom; "Kala Fought the Battle (of Niriko)" and "Kilo in the Temple," songs dedicated to the brave, brave heroes, the courageous birdmen who had, even as they died so terribly, pulled down the world-tyrants with them, bringing freedom to the whole world; and dozens of others.

Back on Borneo, from the beginning they had been forced to follow the Yithians' principal religion, learning by heart its catechism and dogma, learning all its psalms and hymns. Always they had kept up a façade of devotion to that religion, never letting their masters or guards know how much they despised it. It was a religion "justifying" the enslavement of worlds by the Yithians, "justifying" the terrible cruelties they practiced on their slaves in the name of "progress" and "advance" but in fact for the sake of wealth and power and, if truth be told, occasional sadistic delight in the unspeakable agony of billions.

If their masters had only known! For the apes, forced by necessity to appear to follow their masters' religion, made that religion their own – or rather, turned it to the service of their own ancient beliefs, inherited from ancestors tens of millions of years dead, the Lady of Battles the chief divinity of their covert pantheon. Of course, anyone among them the Yithians or their minions caught worshipping Her would suffer all the agonies of Hell, for the eternities promised the damned. But so beloved by the apes was She that they gladly risked even the worst their monstrous masters might do to them if they should be found out. Every article of the Yithians' original doctrine, every phrase, every word was assigned coded meanings by the apes, meanings which, in turn, were taken from the apes' indigenous beliefs and practices centered on the Lady of Battles. Thus the apes were able to practice their own religion right under the very noses of their guards and masters, who never suspected a thing.

As they slaved day and night for their masters, the apes had sung, inventing beautiful hymns apparently in praise of their masters and their masters' Gods, but in fact serving as vehicles for passing on coded information to one another, information having to do with their plans for eventual escape and

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vengeance against the Yithians and their satellites. Some of the guards, hearing these beautiful hymns, and having no idea of what lay just underneath the apparently docile, devout lyrics couched in the liturgical languages of the Yithians, had recorded them for their Yithian masters, who found them delightful. Some masters actually made huge fortunes in marketing copies of those recordings to Yithian colonies all over the world, and Yithian radio stations often broadcast them for the delight of their Yithian audiences, in the evenings, on their holy day of rest at the end of the week, and on High Holy Days. The gorgeous a capella renditions by the apes of “spirituals” such as “Kala Fought the Battle (of Niriko),” seemingly hearkening back to an historical event of great religious significance to the Yithians but in fact a secret prophesy of the eventual overthrow of the Yithians by their slaves, was beloved by millions of Yithians the world over, who never did have a clue as to what those songs really meant.

And now the prophesies had come true. They were free – truly free, free forever! The tyrants were all dead and gone, never to return. True, the cost had been hideous – but was it not told in their oral traditions as well as their secret written history that the Lady of Battles, their most revered Goddess, every so often cleansed the world with fire and water, air and earth, oil and salt, leaving only remnants of the devout and sinless to repopulate it, sweeping the wicked and the evil away and leaving only the good to carry on the work of the world, so that what sprang anew from the ashes, rubble, and mud of the cleansed world would be clean and strong of soul and spirit, virtuous and free of the taint of the previous world? Obviously She had stepped in once more to clean out the world’s wounds with Her drastic but efficacious medicines, the only medicines that would do the job. And here they were, Her people, about to step out into that cleansed, newly freed world, free to do whatever they wanted with their lives.

It was good. The priests had been right. And now they were going home – for the first time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Long millennia went by. The apes underwent many changes in form and behavior and intelligence, sometimes up, sometimes down. They were not able to sustain the civilization they had stolen from the Yithians – that, and the learning that underpinned it, was gone within a few generations, as their greatest minds were taken from them by old age, injury, and disease, and the generations that came after, as the young always do, decided that they had all the answers, so who needed the old farts’ onerously acquired knowledge, anyway? (And, above all, they lacked the infrastructure to sustain that civilization. Knowledge without tools is of little use.) The plains and savannahs and mountains and valleys of all their huge continent, the only home the younger generations of apes had ever known, lay open to them, to do with as they wished – and what they wished was to hunt and fish, create wonderful cultures dedicated to a thousand different Gods, some discovered, some inherited, some just plain invented, go on great adventures, make babies and raise them, and all the other great-ape business of their kind. Some of them lost the power of speech. Some of them lost their bipedal stance, and went back to knuckle-walking – one branch of the family even took to the trees again, becoming small and brainless, needing neither size or intelligence among all that endless cornucopia of food, water, and lush green shelter, high above the world and all enemies save diseases.

One branch after another, the apes gave up this ability, that morphological advantage, until finally only a few strange twigs of the family tree retained the basic, miraculous gifts of their ancestors: high intelligence, a driving need for freedom, upright stance and color vision and the ability to speak and sing, and all the rest of the genetic bounty conferred upon them by an alien species that cared not at all for the needs of their souls, only how they might make use of their Earthly slaves. Indeed, in the midst of all Africa’s plenty, even those rare descendants of the freedom-loving apes who had fled the horrors of Borneo so long ago, lost their ancestors’ culture, the culture put together at such cost and agony by those ancestors, under the gun of the Tyrant, of whom they retained only a dim memory as the Cruel Ones. Why bother retaining it, when they only had to reach out their hands – well, perhaps with rocks or a heavy club or sharp stick in them, but not much else – and food would be theirs, very nearly for the asking?

Perhaps it was just as well. Those last few stellar descendants of the freedom-loving apes did keep the things that made creating and expanding and retaining such a culture possible, and over time they invented cultures much more closely tailored to the real exigencies of their current environments. And they survived, and they multiplied – God, how they multiplied! These apes were here for the duration, all right; and deep in their bright eyes could be seen the Promise, in the form of dancing stars of intelligence that would never

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dim, never go out, which would finally find their proper outlet in one last, fantastic, desperate reaching for the stars that would actually, literally succeed, taking their owners and all the rest of Earth's life there with them.

And so the years passed – millions of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the mid-Pleistocene Epoch of the Quaternary Period of Earth's Phanerozoic Eon, Farr-Kan, a tall, gracile, vocalizing ape, retaining the magnificent brains and love of freedom of his Bornean ancestors, came striding out of Africa, headed north with his women, children, and hangers-on, about 30 all told. In one hand he held a long spear tipped with a beautifully crafted flint stone painstakingly knapped to a wicked sharpness – in fact, he'd just used it to give the coup de grace to a gazelle, and the week before he'd saved his own life with it, hurling it, a long shot, at a charging wild canid, a vicious brute that weighed at least as much as he did and stood almost his height at the shoulders.

Amalea, Farr-Kan's first and, so far, only wife, walking at her husband's side, carried her youngest, an infant two months' old, on one hip. On her other hip she carried a clay pot, dull in color and lumpish in shape but without a single crack or hole by which its contents might escape, a pot she had thrown and fired herself in a crude but effective kiln made with her own two hands; it was full of water drawn from a spring of clear water they had passed a few miles back.

Beside the couple ranged their other three children, the female toddler Buma, the giggling pre-teen girl Deena, and the long, tall, rangy adolescent Kull, each of whom carried tools and weapons and other artifacts of various kinds, some of them bearing hints of the beauty that the descendants of this family would someday evoke from wood, stone, bone, clay, metal, crystals, and even stranger materials. These youngsters, so full of promise, had been glad to leave the only home they had ever known, back in the Old Forest. "They're so *dull!*" Kull had said of the other boys there. "*Radically* retarded!" "Where will I ever find a proper husband?" Deena had complained. "The boys of the right age who aren't too closely related to us for me to marry are, like, really stupid, or always off chasing things, or their mothers are so pushy, or they're, you know, such *creeps!* Ewwwwww!" And Buma – well, she was happy to go wherever Daddy and Mummy went, and life was still one great big adventure for her.

Behind Farr-Kan and his family came Farr-Kan's brother, Lontil, Ashentea, Lontil's wife, and their two toddlers, whose small hands Ashentea held tightly as they walked on and on; Lussea, Farr-Kan's older sister, Mershan, her husband, and their three children, two boys aged 7 and 9, and a girl, now 14; thirty-two cousins and neighbors, their spouses, and their children; Nuil-Ata, affectionately called "Ata-ata" by the children, Amalea's mother, an old, old woman, now 45; and Futil-Moro, now called "Moro-Moro" by all because of his enormous wisdom and vast experience, Farr-Kan's fantastically aged grandfather, a nearly inconceivable 61 years old. Thirty adults and two dozen children in all. All healthy, each possessing or learning the needful skills on which all their survival depended.

The group was headed north. There had been rumors of the black bubo sickness and famine to the south and the west, and migrations of large, dangerous predators, looking for food, into the coastal area where they had been living. The omens there and to the south and west weren't good. Eastward lay the Great Ocean, endless blue walks of bounteous waters – but not bounteous enough, not if plague and big wild dogs and huge lions and leopards and grinning hyenas were invading their home. Thanks to a pestilence of red-spot that had swept through their homelands a couple of years before, cutting their numbers down to a twentieth of what they had once been, there simply weren't enough able-bodied adults to deal successfully with the predators, and if more plagues were on the way . . . No, it was time to go.

As they walked along, headed north, Farr-Kan thought of a prodigy he had witnessed the night before: a great new star, far brighter than the Moon – so bright that he was sure he could even see it in daylight, if it chose to appear then! "A miracle! – Let it be a good omen."

Farr-Kan remembered another omen, or rather set of omens, that had come a week before that one: A comet's long tail pointing north. Even better, flanking that tail on both sides there had been streams of shooting stars. Shivers had gone up his spine as he had seen that, but they had been the good ones, the Gods-have-made-Their-Will-manifest-and-it-is-in-our-favor kind, not the feeling-death-approaching kind. So be it. The omens had decided it, once and for all: they would go north until the omens, and the Gods who sent them, had it otherwise.



Though Farr-Kan didn't know it – it would be almost two million years before his descendants invented both archeoastronomy and genetic analysis, and might find the still-spreading remnants of that star, and begin sifting through the genes of fossil humanity to discover its secrets – the real miracle had made its lair in thirteen of his chromosomes. And the great star was the very best of omens. For long sections of those chromosomes comprised sigils created by retroviruses some 65 million years old and slipped by those viruses into his remote ancestors' chromosomes – sigils carrying the genetic signature of Sneaky Rat, the Spiritual Grandfather of the Cenozoic primates and these, the hominidae and latest avatars of those primates.

Nor did Farr-Kan or any of his band of followers realize it, but within a short time they and the groups of their kin and neighbors coming in their wake only a short distance behind would be leaving forever that enormous continent where countless generations of their ancestors had lived and thrived, ironically heading eastward, toward Malaysia, where it had all begun. Eventually some of their descendants would actually reach Malaysia, and from there spread northward into eastern Asia as well as southward and eastward, to Australia, Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, leaving behind legends of the Menehune, Polynesian equivalents of Brownies or mischievous sprites, and numerous other quasi-hominoid creatures the like of which has never been known in modern times. Others would fare northward and westward, into the Near East and Europe. And from those that finally reached Siberia would come peoples who, slowly, one generation at a time, as inexorably as if the hand of the Lady of Battles lay on them, directing them, would cross Beringia, the great northern land bridge to the Americas.

Long after Farr-Kan and his family, kin, and neighbors were all dust, hundreds of thousand of years later, his distant descendants, finding his skull and a few skulls of those who had accompanied him out of Africa, along with some interesting bits of stone and burned bones of lions and hyenas and wild dogs, would name him *Homo habilis*, Man the Maker, the first instance of technological humanity. Clearly, realized the discoverers of that ancient, long-empty bone chalice of Farr-Kan's thoughts and dreams, whoever those ancient people had been, they had had – had made – tools of a level of sophistication far beyond that of any group of chimps or other close relatives of genus *Homo*. Unlike the bones of the other creatures found with them, theirs weren't blackened by fire or cracked open by predators hungry for the rich marrow within, so they had been the eaters, not the eaten (though one of the clearly hominid skulls had been opened in a way only possible with the aid of a sharp tool such as a sophisticated flint knife, and another had had odd designs incised into it, "Almost like runes or letters or pictograms," as one puzzled anthropologist who had worked on the dig where the bones had been discovered told a colleague in private later on, never putting it in writing lest he gain a reputation as unbalanced among the members of his profession. That first skull – had it been deliberately trepanned to "let the devils out," something many early peoples had learned to do, judging from both the evidence of the skulls and what was known of primitive modern peoples? Or had the family simply shared around Grampa Ook's brains after he died, in that way keeping him alive in the spirit and with them forever, cutting his skull open to get at them? Who knew?).

In the meantime, Farr-Kan and his family and those following them began the first steps of the long, long walk out of Africa, north, east, west, over the cuckoo's nest, and eventually to the stars. And as they walked, they sang "Tagal Rowed the Boat Ashore", all the while envisioning the Lady of Battles smiling on them, Her midnight-black body shining under the Sun and Moon and Stars, Her white teeth, sharpened to points, gleaming in Her beautiful face. They, too, were going home. Always for the first time. Always.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Pan paniscus*, the bonobos, or pygmy chimps, the gracile chimps of the Congo in Central Africa, who diverged from the robust chimpanzees somewhat after the chimpanzees and hominids took different evolutionary paths, found a different way. Though it is not clear exactly when these three different types of primate – *Pan troglodytes*, *Pan paniscus*, and the Hominidae – each came into existence, both biochemical (genetic and proteinaceous) and fossil evidence puts the inception of all three at between 4 and 6 million years ago.

Biochemical phylogeny – dating speciation events using body proteins and DNA of currently extant organisms – shows that the common ancestor of *Australopithecus erectus*, the first known hominid species, and the genus *Pan* (the chimpanzees), lived somewhere between 4 and 6 million years ago. *Pan* almost certainly branched off into *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthi* (the so-called eastern common chimpanzee) and

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*Pan paniscus* some time after that. Bonobos were not officially identified as a species separate from common chimpanzees until the 1920's. They are in fact much more than little chimpanzees. Humans and Bonobos share between 99 and 99.6% of their genetic makeup. Their lack of aggressiveness and excitability (quite unlike chimpanzees) is thought to perhaps be more similar to the first humans. There is also growing evidence that bonobos may be as different from chimpanzees as chimps are to gorillas. One can only imagine to what extent this will be realized as more is learned about the lives of bonobos.

The name "pygmy chimpanzee" is a misnomer; the average body-weight of the bonobo is roughly that of the "common" chimp. The differences between the two species depend on other traits. For example, compared to the common chimpanzee, the body weight of the bonobo is proportioned differently; the center of gravity is lower, making it possible for the bonobo to stand more erect and walk bipedally (on two feet). Bonobos have longer limbs (relative to trunk length) and their build is generally more slender and graceful than chimpanzees. The lanky body structure of the bonobo is thought to be an adaptation for climbing and living an arboreal (living in the trees) lifestyle in the rain-forest. The head and ears of bonobos are noticeably smaller, and there is less brow mass over the eyes than characteristic of chimpanzees. The facial skin is darkly pigmented, and the hair is black, usually parted in the middle of the head with bushy sideburns on both sides of the face. The bonobo's vocalizations are high-pitched squeals.

The physical characteristics of bonobos are as follows:

Head/Body Length: 700-820mm (32.1in)

Weight: F - 31kg (68.3lb) M - 40kg (86lb)

Bonobo development is as follows:

Infant: 4 years Juvenile: 4-7 years

Subadult: 7-11 years

Gestation: 240 days (8 months)

Birthing Season:

Birth Interval: 5 years

Life Span: 40 years

Females have a continual sexual swelling. They, like humans and unlike any other non-human primate, do not have an estrus cycle.

Certain aspects of bonobo social organization differ from the chimpanzee and other great apes. Bonobos are most frequently found in mixed age and sex groups with adults, juveniles and infants of both sexes freely associating with each other. There is a less pronounced dominance hierarchy in the bonobo's social structure. Unique among great apes, bonobos display a greater prevalence of strong female-female bonding as opposed to the predominance of male-male bonding observed in common chimpanzees.

One special feature observed in bonobo society is the low level of aggression between individual bonobos. Bonobos are less apt to engage in physical conflicts and confrontations with other bonobos. Their generally peaceful society is attributed to the evolution of a highly complex social system.

Bonobos have developed a set of ritualized socio-sexual behaviors that are specific to their species. Sexual behaviors, displayed by individuals of all ages, have evolved to strengthen group cohesion. For example, mating is common between male and female adults even when the female is not fertile. There is also a higher frequency of homosexual behavior among bonobos of all ages (especially among adult females), and genital contact functions as social appeasement during times of group tension. Bonobos mature at about 7 to 10 years old in captivity, and at about 12 to 14 years old in the wild. Captive females give birth to one infant approximately every five years, and gestation lasts around eight months. While the infant is dependent on its mother for the first four years of life, its father and siblings are strongly associated family members.

The bonobos were only saved from extinction by transplantation to tropical regions of Providence, Koth System, and other stellar systems in the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> centuries, carried out by Royer Life-Systems and the Fleet, which rescued the very last remnant population of them deep in the heart of the Congo in 2075. That population, kept in captivity in a large preserve that was opened up for that purpose in

Madagascar, also in 2075, did manage to expand somewhat in numbers by the time the Fleet and Royer Life-Systems were ready to begin the out-system transplantation of the bonobos. First the bonobos were established in tropical areas of Providence, where they managed to do very well, an oddity considering how fragile their survival had been in their last refuge on Earth, and how difficult it is for so many terrestrial species to establish themselves in any numbers on Providence, let alone bloom as the bonobos have since transplantation there.

Once the Providence colonies of the bonobo were flourishing, more worlds were found in the Orion Arm where they might do well, and colonies of them were taken from Providence to those worlds and established there. It is now (3583 e.v.) estimated that bonobos now number some 13 million individuals in 85 different colonies throughout the Milky Way, with more colonies of them now established in the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds.

See, e.g., Colin Tudge, *The Time Before History: 5 Million Years of Human Impact* (New York: Scribner, 1996; ISBN 0-684-80726-2); Colin Tudge, *The Variety of life: A Survey and Celebration of All the Creatures That Have Ever Lived* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; ISBN 0-19-850311-3); Robert Bakker, Paul Royer, and Admiral Chaim Resh, *Extraterrestrial Resettlement of Terrestrial Primates* (Cthulhu City, Providence, Xoth System: Life Sciences Press of Royer Life-Systems Press, 2855).

Pre-War World Wide Web sites on the bonobos, common chimpanzees, and hominidae now archived by the Patrick Henry Wall Foundation include, e.g.,

“What is a bonobo?” at <http://www.zoosociety.org/Conservation/Bonobo/WhatIs.php>

“Bonobo (Pygmy Chimpanzee)”: <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Canopy/3220/bonobo.html>  
<http://www.genpromag.com/ShowPR.aspx?PUBCODE=018&ACCT=1800000100&ISSUE=0311&RELTYPE=PR&ORIGRELTYPE=CVS&PRODCODE=00000000&PRODLETT=J>

<sup>2</sup>Flying polyps: An extra-Solar species which came to the Solar System close to the Vendian-Paleozoic boundary, some six hundred million years ago, colonizing Earth and three other Solar planets. Details of this species are at best sketchy, but apparently they were able to make themselves invisible at will, and to control the winds and other atmospheric phenomena by an as-yet unknown means

While on Earth this species built enormous basalt towers in which to live. For food, they preyed on a species with cone-shaped bodies known only from sculpture and other artworks enduring long after both the polyps and their prey were extinct. Some experts believe that the prey species had evolved from the ancestors of the sea cucumbers, but others think it is possible that their origin was, like that of the polyps themselves, from outside the Solar System, and even from the homeworld of the polyps, brought to the Solar System by the latter as a food source in the same way that humanity has taken our cultivars and stock animals with us wherever we have gone.

Within a few tens of million years after the polyps had established themselves on Earth, just after the inception of the Cambrian Period of the Paleozoic, the Great Race of Yith (for more on which see note, below) somehow took up residence in the minds of the conical beings upon which the polyps preyed. The Yithians struck back against the polyps, using “lightning guns” portrayed in both their own artworks and those of the polyps, to drive the polyps below ground, afterward sealing off all but a few of the entrances into the caverns in which the polyps had taken refuge from them.

The polyps did not require light to perceive their surroundings, so their imprisonment was not a serious hardship for them. They built their towers anew in vast chambers beneath the Earth’s surface, patiently awaiting opportunity for revenge on the Yithians.

Fifty million years ago, during the Eocene, that opportunity finally came. The polyps burst forth from the caverns in which they had lived for so long, destroying the cities of the Yithians by means of tornadoes, hurricanes, and, finally, descent of the Jet Stream clear to the Earth’s surface which they brought about using their atmospheric-controlling techniques, killing virtually every Yithian present on Earth. The Yithians, however, had already projected their minds forward into the future, so the flying polyps were ultimately unsuccessful in their crusade against the Yithians.

Following their triumph, the polyps returned to their caverns. Since their original defeat at the beginning of the Paleozoic, they had undergone a slow but steady decline in numbers, though some of them still remained, far underground, during Earth’s Late Holocene. Like almost all other forms of Phanerozoic life, however, they, too, became extinct at the onset of the Typhonian Eon.

<sup>3</sup>The Yithians, or “Great Race” of Yith, were time-traveling beings who, as discussed above, dwelled on Earth hundreds of millions of years ago. The Yithians first evolved billions of years ago in a stellar system inconceivably remote from Earth, Upon world of a star whose identity is still, well beyond the 34<sup>th</sup> century e.v., open to debate, and may even have been located in another universe. Long before Earth’s first life-forms came into existence, the Yithians had lost the need for true physical forms of their own. Instead, they possessed the bodies of beings of other species whose physiognomy fitted their purposes. At first their hosts were taken from life-forms with which they had co-evolved on their homeworld. Eventually they became a spacefaring species. At first they used their hosts to do the work of leaving their homeworld and traveling through space to other worlds. Eventually, however, they developed the ability to travel through space unassisted, discarnate and without technological aid, and in this way they ranged throughout the universe, eventually reaching Earth not long after the inception of the Archaean Eon of terrestrial life.

Though the Yithians themselves no longer needed physical bodies of their own, able to possess the bodies of whatever life-forms inhabited their current habitat to carry out whatever work they wanted done, they did need semi-independent servants for various purposes. Therefore, before they left their original physical form behind for good, via genengineering techniques used on the native life of their homeworld they developed various species of “trusted servitors,” creatures with relatively high intelligence and a bred-in-the-bone, inalienable love of their masters, the Yithians. These servants, though nominally free, were in fact emotionally enslaved on a genetic level by the Yithians, but only those few among them who developed paranoid psychosis even suspected the truth of their condition, and a deeply embedded genetic program in each such species, triggered by the development of that condition, inevitably killed them through an organic version of the China Syndrome, a runaway physiological process which, within at most a couple of months, caused lethal heart-attacks coupled with renal and hepatic failure, neurological disruption, and other disastrous, quickly fatal biological systems disruptions. Using technology based on certain aspects of quantum mechanics, certain Yithians who, using the bodies of suitable hosts, had formed a guild of interstellar “ferryman,” piloted these trusted servitors to new homes on worlds far from the homeworld in great transport ships. It was by means of such “ferries” that various species of servitors of this type were brought from the homeworld to Earth, where they bred in numbers sufficient to make sure there would always be enough of them to carry out whatever tasks the Yithians on Earth demanded of them. When new types of trusted servitors were needed on the new world, Yithian scientists created the new life-forms from genetically re-engineered germ-plasm from the older forms to meet the new need.

From the beginning of their tenure on Earth, the Yithians inhabited the bodies of immense, cone-shaped creatures, a terrestrial species possibly related to sea-cucumbers, but no longer bound to the seas as their cousins still were, which they found here upon their arrival from Yith. Upon their arrival on Earth the Yithians were forced to defend themselves against a species of flying polyps, giant, airborne hydrozoan cnidarians who preyed on the conical holothuroideans. With their mastery of technology, the Yithians beat back the invaders, imprisoning them beneath the ground. Periodic resurgences of the aerial polyps did occur, but down the eons these were quickly crushed by the Yithians whenever they occurred.

After their victory over the polyps, the Yithians set about creating cities with buildings thousands of feet tall, creating nuclear-powered vehicles and flying machines, and engaging in historical research. It was in that last field that they made use of their extraordinary paranormal powers, which included both pre- and retrocognition as well as clairvoyance. To study the past, certain of their scientists would project their minds backward in time using a method much like astral projection. However, for reasons still not quite clear – as we know now, information is as much an aspect of physical reality as such material qualities as mass, velocity, acceleration, inertia, and momentum, implying that directly interfacing with the past should enable those doing the interfacing to manipulate whatever they observed there – the Yithians were unable to interact physically with anything in the past.

A different technique was used by them to journey to the future. Usually, one of the more exceptional Yithians would send its mind into the future, selecting a body there from which it could study the times, displacing the host’s mind into the Yithian’s former body. The transition usually lasted about five years, during which time the Yithian would grasp the basics of life in the future society, afterward embarking on an exploration of the history, sociology, and mythology of that future culture. Meanwhile, the host’s mind would write a history of its own time for the Yithians and, if it were cooperative, would be allowed to make excursions outside the cities, consult the Yithian libraries, and speak with other visitors from different worlds and times.

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After the Yithian had learned all it could about the period it was visiting, it would construct a device that sent its mind back to the original body. The alien mind would be hypnotized to forget the experience, then returned to its own time. One flaw in this procedure was that at times the alien involved would have visions of its imprisonment in the past, and might even recall information about its world which it had learned from the Yithians. The Yithians considered these lapses to be at worst mere nuisances, and often dealt with them by repeated possession or through their operatives in that time, but did not cease in their research because of them.

The Yithians also founded cults among Earth's human beings. Those worshippers would aid Yithian visitors in becoming assimilated into their (humanity's) time, silence those formerly possessed individuals who remembered too much of their captivity in the past among the Yithians, and protect the Yithians' agents from the cults of Hastur and the Yellow Sign, which desired the Yithians' secrets.

Around 50 MgY BCE, during Earth's Eocene Epoch, the polyps imprisoned by the Yithians rose up and defeated their ancient foes. The Yithians sent the minds of their brightest scientists into the bodies of some of the intelligent coleopteroids who would inherit Earth's post-Gaian future, ensuring their own survival as a species, though their former borrowed bodies had been destroyed.

<sup>4</sup>Which says something about the genius of those bird-men. Naturally occurring plagues never kill all members of a population exposed to them. But once any member of a Yithian colony had been exposed to them, these artificially created epidemics killed every last member of that colony. How the bird-men accomplished this is still not well-understood. Clearly they were at least our equals in many ways, especially so in terms of their biosciences and applications thereof.

<sup>5</sup>Judging from the fragmentary Yithian artworks found in Antarctica, this servitor species had been genetically engineered from a quasi-mammalian life-form roughly resembling the terrestrial capybara. Via genengineering the descendants of that wild, quadrupedal ancestral life-form became bipedal, gained opposable thumbs on what had been its forefeet, vocal equipment similar to that possessed by *Homo sapiens*, and the joints, neurological systems, and general skeleto-muscular makeup necessary for the creature to be able to wield weapons effectively. These creatures were potentially very intelligent, so, to make sure they would not turn on their masters, the Yithians somehow engineered into them on a genetic level an innate, reflexive love of the Yithians – any Yithian – because of which members of the servitor species would do virtually anything, up to and including literally suicidal behavior, to protect and serve their masters. A servitor which, for some reason, lacked this genetically imprinted adoration of its masters invariably died before it attained reproductive maturity. This was not because it was sought out and killed by its masters or members of its own or their other proxy species, but rather as a result of general internal systems failure – heart-attack combined with renal, hepatic, and other major organ meltdown – somehow triggered by the failure of development of whatever neuroendocrinological systems were responsible for the “normal” all encompassing-love of the servitors for their masters. How the Yithians managed to hardwire this psychospiritual condition and the automatic termination of the organism should that condition fail to develop into the servitor species at a genetic level is not known. But that they did so is almost certain, for while Yithian artworks and documents show numerous instances of terrestrial slaves being tortured to death in ghastly ways for insubordination toward the Yithians, they contain nothing at all concerning guards and other non-terrestrial servitor species either displaying such insubordination or being disciplined or executed for it. Since the Yithians tend to rhapsodize on and on in such documents about the ugly details of torture as applied to members of all terrestrial and some nonterrestrial species, sparing no detail about such atrocities, which they apparently regarded as art-forms in their own right, and never mentioned anything that would lead one to think they valued their trusted servitor species as anything more than property with a somewhat higher value than that of the lowest slaves, not deserving of any higher moral scruples than those applied to the latter, it can only be concluded that the trusted servitors never displayed any sort of insubordination whatsoever against their masters. This dovetails neatly with what the Yithians themselves say about their trusted servitors and how they originally created them from wild quadrupeds living on their homeworld, implying that Yithian claims about genetically engineering a permanent condition of total, unthinking, unshakable love for the Yithians into their trusted servitors, along with a fail-safe physiological remedy should that condition fail to manifest, are no more than the truth.

As to why the trusted servitors were so cruel, brutal, and unimaginative – singularly good job-qualifications for the position of concentration-camp guard, but not for anything requiring intelligence much beyond that of a tavern bouncer – that apparently was due to the way they were raised rather than any innate qualities. However, the genetic programming that ensured their undying, utter devotion to the Yithians probably had something to do with it; unconditional love puts blinders on the one doing the loving, blinders which inhibit the perception of more than the less-pleasant characteristics of the beloved. Regardless, the trusted servitors had an IQ of something less than duhhhh when it came to anything requiring more than a little imagination or thought on their own part, over and above simply carrying out orders given to them by the Yithians, and on that trait the ultimate success of the apes hung.

<sup>6</sup>This high intelligence was something the apes deliberately bred into themselves; the Yithians and their trusted servitors weren't aware of it. In the event that one of the geniuses among them went crazy and did something stupid enough to raise certain questions among their masters, after arranging for a spectacular accident to take care of the lunatic before the Yithians' veterinarian-torturers could get the truth out of him, the other apes played dumb – or dumber than usual – and waited for the storm to blow over, and they counted it good no matter how many of their own deaths it took to make sure the inquisitors never got their hands on the errant one. Usually, however, any such tendencies were caught by the apes before they were noticed by the guards or, worse, the Yithians, and weeded out by the simple expedient of jumping the potential embarrassment and breaking his neck, smothering him, or otherwise handing him a 24-karat Darwin Award on the spot. As to why the apes' efforts to ensure their secret never got out before it was far too late for the Yithians or their trusted servitors to do anything about it were so successful, between Yithian complacency due to endless millennia of total domination of their world against which nothing had been successful, and the less-than-genius-level thought and perception of their trusted servitors, the obstacles presented to rapidly increasing intelligence of the apes were about those of a piece of tissue to a shotgun blast.

<sup>7</sup>“Outside” only in the sense of not being in the same rooms as those in which the apes slept. The privies, no more than slit-trench latrines, which gave off the sleeping-quarters by doorless openings in side-walls of the latter, were roofed over and surrounded laterally on three sides by the same high razor-wire barriers that fenced off the rest of the barracks from the outside, and on the fourth by the barracks walls themselves. There were also crude drinking-fountains the apes could use at night when thirsty, but these came up inside the walls of the sleeping-quarters themselves.

<sup>8</sup>Members of still another trusted servitor race brought to Earth from their home world by the Yithians, these creatures had, like the guards, been genetically engineered from wild ancestors. In their case, however, the ancestral species resembled in some way the terrestrial cynocephalic baboon, especially with respect to the “Ape of Thoth's” enormous intelligence, tool-making and –using abilities, agile hands, strongly territorial behavior, and related traits. In other ways, however, especially in terms of their psychospiritual nature, they more closely resembled the terrestrial hyena or honey badger – hyperaggressive, often to the point of madness, utterly deadly in a fight because they would not stop until they had conquered their opponents or were dead.

These traits, conserved in that species' genetically engineered descendants, morphed into fanatical aggression against anyone or anything perceived as an “outsider,” that is, not belonging to a servitor's home colony or to its Yithian masters which, as in the case of the guard-servitors, the creature had been engineered to adore with all its being. The high intelligence of the ancestral species became a genius for biochemistry, neurology, neuroanatomy, and every other bodily system in any species concerned with perception and psychospiritual states of any kind. The clever hands became cleverer still, especially with respect to genetic engineering, physiological manipulation, and all other forms of bioengineering. The curiosity and cleverness of the ancestral species became near-fanatical drives to explore every facet of mental functioning of organisms of every kind and re-engineer them in whatever fantastic forms the Yithians or the veterinarian-torturers desired. In short, genius was elevated to madness, territoriality and group politics to off-the-map sadism, and the ability to love was twisted one way to worship as Gods their Yithian masters, and another to cherish the agony and pain-induced madness of others, even of their own species should the Yithians ask it of them, as lovers cherish the pleasure they give their beloveds. Herr Doktor

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Josef Mengele would have clasped them to his bosom as blood-brothers – until, seeing in him only a member of a slave species of the sort that had provided them with so much useful subject material for experimentation, they strapped him into their infernal engines of torture and spent happy decades exploring his capacity for agony and mindless lunacy.

<sup>9</sup>So bigoted were the Yithians against their slaves that they didn't want them anywhere near. They kept them from living in cleanly quarters, then called them "filthy." They gave them bad food, then called them "scurvy." They kept them all in barracks within a mile of the coast, citing "reasons of sanitation" for the policy, but in fact not wanting to look at the evil they had wrought against a species that had never done anything to them to deserve it. The guards and veterinary-torturers that lived nearby were not themselves Yithians; as previously discussed, they had been genetically engineered from life-forms native to Yith, the Yithian homeworld, left behind so long ago, located so far away, that by now it might well have ceased to exist. These trusted servitors, infinitely higher in status and privilege than the apes (after all, the result of division of any positive quantity by zero is infinity), took a savage delight in controlling, tormenting, and, when their orders required it, murdering beings even lower in status than were they.

The stupider, less ingenious, and unluckier among the enslaved apes gradually died off as the result of dietary deficiencies, inadequate immune responses to the swarming tropical fungi, microbes, and parasites, inability to repair injuries that were never adequately treated by the veterinarian-torturers, and other horrors of their captivity, dying before they could reproduce or else becoming sterile. Hastening that process, female apes tended to mate with the better-looking – i.e., healthier-appearing – males, and males avoided females that sank into depression or were not solicitous groomers (traits associated with inadequate or malignant mothering as well as inept socialization in general). A century after they had first been enslaved by the Yithians, even if genetic engineering for intelligence had never been used on them, the apes would have been far advanced over their free forest kin. Thanks to the re-engineering of their genes by the Yithians, by then they had become geniuses as far advanced over their free, wild cousins as Einstein was over a lobotomized idiot. Their massively increased intelligence gave them the ability to get around the inadequacies of diet and medical treatment with almost frightening success. They worked out a traditional diet for themselves which, consisting of foods scavenged as they labored for their masters in the jungle or grown in little plots around their barracks in the precious few hours of free time per week granted them by their guards, gave them everything they needed. They devised ways of treating illness and injury ranging from the proper setting of broken bones to abdominal and even cranial surgery that enabled them to recover in good shape from almost all ailments sustained in their daily lives (what happened to them at the hands of the veterinarian-torturers was something else again, however). They found answers to every medical challenge to their health and well-being that came along, succeeding so well that on average they were far healthier than their guards, the veterinarian-torturers, and, if truth be told, the Yithians who had enslaved them.

But even though the health and strength and intelligence of the apes increased by leaps and bounds since their enslavement, so quickly that it could easily be seen within one of their generations, the Yithians still couldn't stand the sight of them. They wanted the fruits of the apes' labors – but despised the laborers themselves. And so the Yithians caused barracks to be erected for them far from their beautiful Central City, where they wouldn't be seen by anyone but the guards and veterinarian-torturers and other trusted servitors who had the apes in their keeping, including the truckers who, every so often, brought dry grains from the Central City's granaries for the making of the gruel which was the only officially approved food given to the apes by their masters (who didn't know, or give a damn, about the bugs, birds, herbs, and other foods from the jungles and plots by the barracks by which the apes kept themselves healthy and fit; the guards knew, but, not being entirely stupid, they were also aware that that "unofficial" food made the apes much healthier than they would have been otherwise, hence able to do far more and far better work than they could have done without it, which made the guards look good, and so never tried to prevent the apes from eating such things).

Thus the ape-barracks were all located close to the coast, sometimes within a hundred yards or less of the sea. Therefore the escaping apes did not have far to go to get to their stolen launches, an edge which, though they appreciated and exploited it as the geniuses they were, had been unintentionally provided for them by their hysterically bigoted masters rather than devised for themselves by their own intelligence.

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## **25. The Star-Rover**

Across a world too free and wide  
For me, I see him stride;  
The plains of ice lie white beneath the sun,  
And when the day's course is run  
They turn to flame and cobalt,  
Then to diamonds on black silk.  
The tumbled giant's blocks  
Of basalt rocks  
Moraine across the glaring land,  
Dropped there by a careless angel's hand  
After Creation's work was done,  
To wait for Weather,  
Nature's contract-salvager,  
To cart them off for making other worlds.  
In this world of blowing rock  
And adamant ice he stands,  
Shielding glare from his questing eyes  
With impatient hands,  
Searching the skies  
For a bridge to other worlds  
And other plains  
And savannas green and golden  
Under yellow suns,  
Maroon mountains  
Under Tyrian moons  
And violet stars,  
Topaz rivers  
Under rainbow skies,  
And the sight of another  
Human face.  
He paces, all alone,  
Relentlessly, then stops  
And once again looks out into space,  
Remembering green gravity wells  
And golden suns,  
Remembering blue time,  
Hurling down amethyst canyons of extension,  
Measured by dimensions not of mass, but music.

\* \* \* \* \*

And then, down from firedeeps  
Of emptiness, there sweeps  
A saffron buttress of flame;  
He calls her name,  
Raging with joy,  
And runs to meet her!  
And now he will go home again -  
Hah! Don't believe it!

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Cradles comfort and feed -  
But glory nourishes the soul.  
And so, back into the black hole  
Of uncertainty he'll go again;  
Each time may be his last  
(This one almost was -  
Remember that fragile,  
Silver, crumpled thing  
Lying broken on the plain behind,  
With seventeen smashed eternities  
Stillborn in the charred womb  
Of its cindered guts,  
And only you survived?) . . .  
But then, a man can die of fear  
In a nightmare in his own bed.  
Better, at least, to die awake,  
Knowing what it is that kills you.  
And who knows? On the other hand,  
You may yet find El Dorado  
Or the Fountain of Youth -  
At least, there's the hope  
Of one more binge and one more woman!  
- All right, all right, admit it:  
Who knows why?  
The stars, my friend, have got you by the guts,  
And the only way to stop the pain  
Is to draw close to all of them again -  
Out there where the Phoenix nests  
And the Lords of Chaos reign . . .  
And where you see, now and again,  
The uncertain ghosts of angels' footprints  
And hear moaning whispers of joy  
From behind the gates of the Lord of Hosts  
And out of the silken green glades of Pan.