

# JUDGMENT DAY™



BRUCE BAUGH

**MAGE**  
THE ASCENSION

# JUDGMENT DAY™

## ASCENSION ⊕ IS AT HAND

A war for reality has raged unabated for centuries between mages of the mystical Nine Traditions and the authoritarian and rational Technocratic Union. Each side has held up the standard of universal enlightenment, but each has fractured and cracked the very nature of reality in a constant quest for victory. Now, as entropy takes a final hold and forced ascension envelops the universe, there remains only for the weight of sins to be judged before all returns to its primal state.

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## ACT THREE ⊕ OF THREE



TIME OF  
JUDGMENT  
MAGE  
THE ASCENSION ⊕

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# JUDGMENT™ DAY

BRUCE BAUGH



TIME OF  
JUDGMENT

ACT THREE OF THE TIME OF JUDGMENT

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## THIS IS THE TIME OF JUDGMENT

In the beginning, the sages say, All was One. Then One divided into Many and troubles multiplied with it.

A battle for the nature of reality has raged since that faraway time, fought by the enlightened, proud and willful people whom some would call mages or warlocks. For the last several centuries, this so-called Ascension War has opposed the dominant Technocratic Union (a unified order dedicated to creating a stolid, predictable universe defined by rationality and science) and the resisting Nine Traditions (disparate groups allied by a belief in creating a universe where wonder and magic are more prevalent). Slowly but surely, the Technocracy has been winning the war, leaching the random elements—like surprise, free will, dissent—out of the universe.

Smaller magical crafts and orders have existed in between the poles of the Technocracy and Traditions, ranging from traditional Asian mystics like the Wu Lung and Wu Keng, to the debased void-worshipping Nephandi, and many others. But with each passing day, their room to maneuver shrinks further.

The ultimate prize in this war is not only the stewardship of reality, but the universal enlightenment called Ascension. In this mythical state, creation can reunify into the primal One, shaped by the victor of the war. A mysterious group called the Rogue Council, however, has sounded a clarion call to the Traditions and many others: soon there will be nothing left to unify.

For three mages, drawn from all sides of the war, Judgment Day is at hand.

## A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE...

Each act of the **Time of Judgment** trilogy adopts the point of view of the supernatural creature whose story it tells. Astute readers will note nods and small references to the larger supernatural world, but most vampires, werewolves, and even mages find their attention drawn to their own problems in these terrible last days. Thus, the three acts of this trilogy are more akin to three facets of a larger happening than sequential sections of a single tale. Each builds upon the others, but tells its own story.



## PART ONE: CALCINATION (HEATING WITHOUT MELTING)

*It was a land in which you could lose your vision if  
you stared into its beauty too long.*

—The Fragile Path: Testaments of the First Ca-  
bal, “The Revelation of Akrites Salonikas the Seer”



## ROBERT

There's no such thing as an average trip out of the material world. The spirit world is vast, complex and above all constantly changing. There are challenges and opportunities I can expect to face, but every single time there's something significant that I hadn't—couldn't have—known about beforehand. So I can only prepare as best I can.

It begins in my mind. Even those of us the spirits feel unaccountably chatty toward mostly deal with material things, and the rules that matter follows. So the first step must be to set my mind free of those constraints. For some people this comes naturally, or at least easily. I awoke to the spirit world in a moment of global chaos, and it seems to have marked me in ways I wish I could overcome. I can't just drift away; I have to *cut* myself away, relying on that oldest and most potent of shamanic tools: pain. I use a pair of knives with blades of meteoric iron, flanking the major veins in my arms and legs with precise slashes. Blood spreads, and the sensation helps me detach consciousness from the surrounding world.

Comes the moment when I'm ready, I shut my eyes and take the step in an indescribable direction. There's a storm blowing at the boundary between worlds, which has raged for as long as I've been able to make these journeys. In an instant, everything around me is filled with stabbing pains far sharper than knives. Inside me, too—one reason for cutting myself the way I do is so that the spirit knives forming inside me can whirl out without making more holes. It's not because of the wind

that I close my eyes, though. It's because of the light, a more-than-rainbow kaleidoscope that hints at messages in a language no modern shaman knows. The first time, I didn't know anything about what was going on and the light practically flayed the back of my eyes out. It took weeks to heal. This time the light beats on my eyelids, but only dim arcs and flares pass through.

In the last moment of transition, there's a sound as alien as the light. It has no tone; it's... not all that much like anything, but somewhat like a chord in the moment where individual notes have not yet come together. I've often wished I could linger longer in the moment and hear if it's developing, but if there's any way to pause partway through the crossing, I've never found it. So the note washes over me and is gone.

I open my eyes to see the soul of New York City spread out before me. It was afternoon back in the material world. Here it's a lingering twilight, the sky reddened by the smoke that continues to pour out of Manhattan's wounds. I arrived in New York City for the first time on September 12, 2001, and what was planned as a quiet gathering of spirit magicians of various traditions turned into weeks of constant labor to complement the physical and social efforts of rescue workers. It's never easy to lay the spirits of mass murder victims to rest in the middle of a city—the sacred geometry of the city works against the personal quests that redemptive repose requires—and on top of that we had to deal with the wounded and blighted spirits of plants, animals and buildings. The chimneys that now

tower up over the skyscraper souls are our work, funneling the worst of the ongoing damage into realms where it can spread and do less harm. One of the chimneys recognizes my arrival and bellows out a friendly greeting. I make a squaring gesture with my arms in response, and it's satisfied for now.

Distance in the spirit world is a matter of connection and significance. I step onto the ground. Because the city knows me, it elevates the ground for a breath and then lowers it, so that now I'm surrounded by the spirits of the block where I did my meditations. I feel a rumbling in my feet that tells me there's trouble brewing again in the foundations. The city's identity formed in the days before steel and concrete and there's still no consensus among the city spirits as to whether the skyscrapers or their predecessors are the truest part of New York. My comrades and I have spent more time than I'd like since the September rescue defusing battles in the making, and we haven't always succeeded. Living people back in the material world sense the fights as surges of unpleasant passions and a lack of confidence in their buildings. It's one more reason people leave now. Here, of course, I would see the battle itself if it broke out, and the war of razed foundations against the buildings on top of them is a dangerous thing. I listen for my totem as I spiral on out into the rest of the city.

There are vines in the streets in this neighborhood. They're new, and I have mixed feelings about them. Any fresh growth is welcome, after a few years of blight. These aren't doing any harm just right now. Still, we'll have to keep an eye on them. I

bend to speak to a fire hydrant spirit. Last year something started a panic among them about impending drought, and ever since then they've been surly about sharing their water. I start by spreading my hands wide: no cupping, nothing in them to hold water. They're dry. The fire hydrant's owl-like stare doesn't relax any, but at least I'm less worried about it biting me when I get close. We speak, not in words but in the shaping and releasing of symbols—it in drips of water, me in currents of air stirred by my waving hands—and reach an understanding. I will attend to its concerns about rust, and it will watch the vines for me.

As I stand up, there's a rustling in the alley across the street. I recognize that particular combination of sounds. My totem is arriving on this plane of the city's soul. In a moment it tumbles into view, glistening in the urban sun. Most shamans—at least, most of those I've worked with or had the opportunity to talk shop with—go on their vision quests and meet the spirit of an animal or plant that embodies an important aspect of their own soul. Me, I ended up in a nightmare junkyard realm and got chosen by the spirit of the discarded. That is, I commune with an animated mount of garbage, whatever's been thrown away and yet has hidden value. This has some distinctive advantages, but at the end of the day, it still means that I hang out more than I'd like with random piles of trash. It smells.

"Robert!" My totem forms triune lips out of paper plates and scraps of chicken bone. "We see spirits reversed!"

"Rubbish," I answer with a smile. "We do." For reasons far from clear to me, my totem never speaks in anything but the present tense. Sometimes present perfect. I'm not sure how aware it is of time, though I know it can distinguish one of my visits from another.

A few weeks ago, I first heard one of the local lamp spirits talking about another of its kind that was "réversed" in some way. The stories have been accumulating, but none of the spirits can very clearly explain what it means. That's not entirely surprising: the experiential world of furniture, appliances and utility installations isn't large, and the underlying urban spirit doesn't transmit a whole lot of extra awareness to the entities that dwell inside it. My totem and I have chosen to wander the city more or less at random in hopes of encountering one of these "reversed" spirits ourselves. So far we haven't found any of them, just accounts of their passing.

Today we concentrate on alleys, particularly ones built with openings at both ends but since blocked off. The sacred geometry of such places draws some kinds of unattached spirits like a cage calling out for something to confine. We speak to quite a variety of spirits as the day wears on, but none with any qualities I'd call reversal.

Sunset comes to some of the crystal towers that are the souls of skyscrapers before it's actually evening. The towers with the best western exposures often like to accumulate sunlight and then let it trickle down at just the right angle to turn it rose and gold. Some of them have sunset for hours

on end. Mostly it's just the quality of the light, but sometimes there's the image of the sun itself held in the cascade. That's how it is now, in our fourteenth alley, so there's a sun ahead of us and another behind. The shadows make it tricky to get a proper sense of things' shapes and boundaries. So I don't realize at first that there's a shadowy figure whose perspective is reversed. I don't even realize that it is a figure in its own right, approaching me and shrinking as it goes, until it reverses course and enlarges while backing up.

The figure is vaguely human. Of course, *most* spirits in urban spirit landscapes are vaguely human, so saying that is about as useful as describing someone in a crowd as "the one with eyes." It's translucent, visible mostly as a darkening of the air, with shading that suggests a solarized photographic negative. And it is indeed interacting very strangely with this part of the spirit world. As it gets farther away from me, it gets sharper, more focused. When it looms closer, it gets blurrier and there's the sort of haze that happens when things move into the distance. This qualifies as reversed as far as I'm concerned. I step forward to speak with it, but it doesn't seem to be able to hear my words. That hazy face just stares at me and mouths unvoiced words of its own.

-My totem spreads itself around the alley. "I go around," it tells me, "and maybe I hear more." I nod in agreement.

I decide that I need to do something to break down these barriers to communication. The altered light within the thing makes me think that per-

haps I can do something that way, so I start grabbing hold of scattered sunbeams. The effort costs me a little tangibility of my own, and my feet drag a bit as gusts in the illumination pull me around. I try some simple tricks first: eclipse, moonlight, aurora, mirroring. None of them bring the thing into sharper focus. I can see that it's mouthing shorter sentences now, looking less desperate but more confused. I hope that has something to do with my work, though I doubt it.

After that first round, I try some more exotic tricks, starting with frequency shifts. That's harder than you might think outside the material world. The spirits of lights aren't directly convertible just by changing their pitch. I have to change their names as well, or rather persuade them to change their own names for a while. All of this requires further negotiation, conducted at the literally lightning tempo they live at. I promise them voltage and opportunities for display once I'm back home, and they agree to cooperate. They cycle out of visible pitches and into most of the spectrum from microwaves to radio waves, and none of it helps. Damn, that's a lot of promises I'll have to honor for nothing back. That's just the way it goes sometimes.

The spirit backs as far away from me as it can in this alley, and I get my best look at it so far. I realize that it's stepping in something like a moonwalk. Reversed in time? I call some of the light around it back to me in hopes of getting a look at it in a reversal of my own, and it snaps into focus within that pocket of recalled light. I see the face of a man, or of some extremely human spirit, and

it's *terrified*. I've seen people scared to death in my time, and this is that same look. I don't think I can manage to speak with proper reversal without giving up the concentration it takes to maintain the light this way, so I have to hope that it'll say something without much prompting.

It does. "You can see me. Can you hear me? Everything is falling apart. Terrible things are coming. We must all flee. The future is no place for you." The words come in an erratic cascade, marred by my difficulty in keeping the tunnel of reversal in place. Then the spirit falls to the ground.... No, it's getting up from the ground, I realize as I think through the implications. I'm just seeing the actions out of order. It looks hurt on the ground, and I see why a moment later. It goes hurtling up into the sky and out of sight. Somewhere up in the future, it began falling, and somehow managed to come back to me here. It's gone for now, though. I let the light return to normal and think about what to do next.

My totem draws itself up again. "That thing," it says with hesitation, "comes from... not a place. Stranger to the world."

"Yes," I say. I know that there's no point in suggesting different times to the Rubbish, as it can't make sense of such things. "From a place we go, perhaps."

The Rubbish pulls itself up lean, then blossoms out at the top. "It goes up, we go up." The heavy debris falls out, and it forms canopies out of plastic and the frames of umbrellas. Soon gusts will carry it up. If I'm to follow, I'll have to change my shape.

I cross my arms in front of my chest and pull my skin off from the shoulders down. Feathers sprout underneath. Two tumbles down the length of the alley suffice to catch my clothes and legs and pull both off, so that my newly formed tail can emerge. I take to the skies as an unkempt gray and white bird something like a seagull. A scavenger of some sort, certainly, though I don't know if it's a reflection of some real species (material or spiritual) or just my soul's fondness for junk expressing itself again.

We rise along the same arc that the reversed thing took, curving over the most actively growing crystal towers. These don't always correspond to construction in the material world in a direct way—when there's material construction, something also grows here, but the tower spirits use their subordinates to fight for control of the vital sparks construction unleashes. The strongest towers get their cuts in a sort of psychopompic protection racket. In any event, the reversed thing had zoomed up somewhere right in the heart of the thickest-growing towers, into space that they've already claimed but not yet filled with anything more than slender rods and shafts. The torrents of sunset make it hard to pick out fine details, but I can still see the thing's wake when the illumination is just right.

As we approach, I see more wakes. Thinking about altered flows of time always confuses me, so I have to sort it through carefully. From their point of view, these things all emerged somewhere close together and spread through the city, lasting for at least a few weeks. From our point of view, they're

rising to that point of origin. I can't see any other actual entities right now, but the turbulence has a distinctive widdershins spin to it. (In terms of their experience, this must be a shockwave of some sort, like a sonic boom or the wave that builds up at the bow of a fast-moving ship.) It's not yet clear from here whether the things all emerged from a single dimensionless point or just somewhere close together, but soon—

A piercing glare from somewhere higher than straight up interrupts my train of thought. The light is a venomous red, brighter than blood and tinged with a glow like nothing in nature. If it weren't for the sense of menace surrounding the glare, it would look like someone's not-very-well executed special effect. I look up, knowing what I'll see. Hanging at the zenith is a daytime star, even more vivid red than the light pushing down at us. This is Anthelios, the Anti-Sun, now drifting from its position directly opposite the solar disc. It arrived in the spirit world's skies not long after I awoke to my calling, and it's been a nagging mystery ever since. It doesn't fit anyone's cosmology very tidily, and it gives off that dreadful passion without actually doing very much. Until now, that is. This light is spiraling around like a spotlight.

My totem and I turn down to avoid it, but a little too late. I glance up once more, and the red light spears me from directly overhead. Without any warning at all, I feel the inward knives that tell me I'm crossing back into the material world. I didn't choose this. Indeed, I struggle to resist it, but to no avail. The last thing I see is the Red Star, now

appallingly clear as I look up within the beam. It's open like an eye staring at me. It blinks, and in that blink I'm pushed out of the spirit world.

I open my eyes in the motel room I rented for the purpose, surrounded by the tools of my tradition. I probe for the spirit world, but I can't find it. The only thing my inner eye can see is the Red Star's blink, endlessly repeating, and the only thing my spirit hands can feel are the knives of the barrier. Somehow the Red Star has cut me off from my soul's home.

## WILLIAM

"Listen up, you primitive screwheads!" I shout at the second squad of technicians. They don't even get the allusion. Damn but I hate having to rely on whatever monkeys the Project happens to send me this week. Come to that, I'd prefer real monkeys, who at least have a better sense of their own ignorance. These kids think they know exactly how dynamic multi-aperture multi-frequency telescopes work. They don't. I'd love to go crawl around underneath the floor myself and get the cabling hauled right, but my damn legs don't accept the cybernetics they've tried out on me and in this wheelchair I can't reach a lot of the places that need reaching.

I realize that it may seem quaint for a cutting-edge technologist like myself to be concerned with analog phenomena. Data as the foundation of the universe, quantized nature of fundamental forces, bits... they're all handy abstractions. But matter's

got a wave nature that's just as real as its particle nature, and there are things we can study only when we look at the waves. I had to go over all these basics all over again at the last design review meeting. Dammit, my high school physics teacher knew this stuff. She had at least a dozen of her original teeth, too, which puts her ahead of most of the Project's tired old eunuchs. Probably similar taste in men, too, now that I think about it. Sometimes I consider setting deathtraps in the boardroom in hopes of breeding a better quality of bosses, but there's just no such animal. Pfeah.

We live in a dangerous time. The ignorant masses would call it a time of awakening monsters, if we let them know the whole story. The universe is depressingly full of loopholes that let stupid and annoying things be true. It takes people like me and these damn monkeys to find the holes, map them out, plug them up, and shoot anything that tries crawling through, all so that the masses get their chance to someday get a damn clue and grow up into a species worth respecting. Yes, on my off days I often contemplate flapping my arms and flying to the moon. Then I get back to work, because despite my bitching, I'd rather know how things work and do something about them than not. And here with Project Sunburst I'm in the midst of the best effort to understand and deal with the most interesting (and most dangerous) things of all. So it could be worse.

Back in 1999, one of those loopholes woke up out of a nap that had kept it busy the last few thousand years and went on a rampage across the densely

populated delta on the border between India and Bangladesh. It was something like a vampire—okay, like a parametabolic hematovore, to be technical—but vastly more powerful. It only lasted a few days, but it created literal megadeaths that we had to cover up. We did, of course, because we do that. Destroying it took the heaviest weapons in our arsenal at the time, missiles augmented with technology derived from theories that we won't be letting out for decades, if ever. We've since replaced and improved them, but it's bad to have to do things that require you to spend a few months subverting thirty-odd nations' intelligence services and all the major and many of the minor media corporations. Better to spot the trouble in advance and fix it before it becomes a story. That's where Project Sunburst comes in. The awakened thing left behind a very distinctive set of markers in various spectra, and the theorists in my unit think that we can scan for them even under a substantial amount of human civilization and inanimate earth. My job is to make it happen.

When this network of satellite-mounted telescopes goes live, we'll be able to scan the whole planet every few months, so we can track not just the state of the world in single moments but do comparisons over time. I suspect that we could have seen that Indian entity beginning to wake up if we'd known what to look for. I've been running some calibration tests and already spotted a few similar targets, and I hope that field teams get out to examine them soon. Today, assuming the monkeys get their act together, I'll do some more testing:

I've got the okay to hook up a full sensorium rig and spin a set of satellites around to do astronomical probing. I *like* looking at the universe, but that's not the point. The point is to see whether assumptions that have (so far) held up when looking across a few dozen kilometers of fairly dense atmosphere at a target whose general properties we already know pretty well generate any bugs when we look much further away. Small errors become big when you let them accumulate long enough: it's why things break down over time. Since we prefer not to run that risk, we try to push hard as quickly as possible, in this case by looking out as far as possible.

I would never tell my subordinates this—my superiors already know it or can if they want to—but I live for these moments when I can move beyond the wreckage that is my body. The very essence of this organization is mind over *everything*: flesh, matter at large, entropy, everything. The agglomeration of agendas and institutions that comprise Iteration X comes together here, with the determination that what we think must triumph over whatever would keep us from thinking clearly and from acting on our conclusions. There is nowhere else in the world better to be than right here for those of us looking to get thought out of flesh. For now it's temporary and draining, but the day's coming when it'll be permanent and easy, and then I can get on with the rest of my existence.

Getting a piece of gear as complex as these telescope controls always takes longer, even when you budget the time for it to take longer. Tracing down mysterious conflicts in hardware and software, re-

running tests to make sure power and data flow as they should, running other tests to make sure I can unhook myself when it's done and don't leave fried bits of frontal lobe on the synaptic probes... tedium. It's not conceptually any different from the preparations an Iron or Bronze Age blacksmith went through at his forge, just lots more things to go wrong. Lunch goes by. Dinner goes by, too. The work I'm doing doesn't require a night sky, but I've got one anyway by the time everything passes final muster.

The popular image of cutting-edge cybernetic gear owes a lot to bad sci-fi movies, and most of the rest to relatively good ones. In fact, this kind of thing is all pretty pragmatic. It doesn't look wildly different from the server farm at any large business's network office, with lots of computing units strung together by tagged cords and cables. The genius of it all is in the software here and the hardware we've been putting into orbit for the last two years, stowed away with publicly identified communications satellites. The most distinctive feature is a metal helmet that looks like it belongs in some comic book. It has four-dozen wires running into the operations console, just above the keyboard racks, and enough insulation on the outer layers that it can actually pick up the operator's neuroelectrical activity. Contrary to widespread folklore, the human brain is a very weak power source, and without the insulation the signal would be totally lost in ambient hum.

I park my wheelchair in front of the keyboards, and fold them up out of the way. I prefer to use the

chord keyboards mounted on the chair, and plug them in. Then I take the helmet and settle it on my head, adjusting it in response to small lights and tones that tell me when each lead is getting a clear signal. This all takes some more time; for some reason it seems like the parietal and temporal leads just don't all want to cooperate. I put my neck through a series of stretching exercises to pull it into a new alignment, and at last everything's ready to go. I push the last buttons to engage the system...

... and I'm huge.

My senses are spread out across nineteen thousand kilometers. (19,229.372 and growing slightly as the widest-spread satellites move into the upper reaches of their orbits.) I'm ever so slightly aware of the delays created by the speed of light: I can't move my whole "body" at once, and need to allow time for things to change in response to my commands. And of course I don't have a single body at all, but separate pieces of physical host scattered around the world, at distances from eighty-one to 3105 kilometers above the surface of the Earth. I could tell you just what deviation there is from median sea level beneath each of them, too, but you don't care and my processors factor all that in. Turning the satellites is a little like moving my eyes and a little like moving my fingers. We used to map things more closely to traditional body movements but found that false assumptions created their own problems. It's better to treat it as something unfamiliar, since it is.

One by one I feel the satellites come fully under my control. The smallest are less than half a

meter across and weigh only a few grams, while the largest are the size of a car and weigh tons. Each has its role in the Sunburst scheme of things: best frequencies, best for varying atmospheric conditions, suitability for operating without identification in particular orbits. I say "identification" because it's nearly impossible to actually hide anything in orbit. A whole lot of amateur and professional astronomers scour the skies every night, looking for everything from comets to quasars. An international effort focuses specifically on orbital debris, to allow for better route planning by commercial satellite operators. They know we're here, they just don't know what we are, any more than they know for sure about the hundreds of governmental satellites with covert missions, the dropped tools left behind by astronauts, the pieces of moon surface blown toward earth by meteor grazes, and all the rest. As long as we keep the "what" our secret, all's well.

The lenses and filters that make our scans possible click into place. At first I look down at my planet in visible light, then in the frequencies that flank it, then in harmonics extending further and further away from visible, and finally with the no-etic and polydimensional factors that the world at large doesn't know about. Everything's working. I hold my breath as I give the commands to spin the satellites around to start looking away from the universe. Nothing compares to it. I see the earth, then the atmosphere, then the solar wind in its multi-billion-year struggle with the Van Allen Belts, and on out to the Moon. From my angle(s),

it's impossible to see the settlements my cohorts operate, which is just as it should be. Neither the permanent settlements on the far side nor the fully automated mining operations in south polar craters can be seen from any angle anywhere near the home world. I could see some of the mining gear's emissions in remote frequencies if their shielding was weak, but it's all strong and the lunarscape looks lifeless, just as it should.

One of the things I'm checking out is tracking errors as the focus changes, so I push the pace of zooming more and more. Public databases provide the data my input aggregators translate into overlays: this is what's expected. Data from Iteration X's own operations and others conducted elsewhere in the Technocratic Union get overlaid on that, showing me what's expected even though esoteric. Whatever doesn't match those gets flagged for my attention. A novice observer would panic at this point, because there's a whole lot that isn't as it should be: an asteroid abnormally hot on its faces away from the sun, unregistered cometary tracks, magnetic fluctuations that don't match with terrestrial observations, you name it. Did I mention the universe is a messy place? If the data precisely match your theory, you know you've done your observing wrong. I mark anomalies outside the patterns I'm looking for and toss them to the Farside crews for further study, and keep tracking.

For no particular reason, I send my collective gaze staring up out of the ecliptic, away from the planets and into the parts of the sky over the North Pole. More of the same there at first, until quite

suddenly familiar patterns emerge. There's the distinctive combination of signatures that I saw in the aftermath of the Bangladesh incident. Out in space. What the hell is anything that responds like a vampire doing out in space? I stare at it more intently, bringing more and more of the available sensors to bear, and a semi-conscious part of my mind initiates the request for additional resources to be put under my temporary control. Alarm bells will be ringing in Sunburst allocation offices in a few minutes.

In the meantime... well. The human eye is a selfish thing. We see ourselves in everything from three-prong electrical outlets to clouds to the grilles of cars. Put a couple of dots and line close together, and we make a face out of it. I'm not immune from the phenomenon just because I have a hate/hate relationship with the human form. So I'm not particularly surprised to see this central reddish mass looking very much like a terrestrial eye. That's just my own animal nature at work. I hope.

As it unfolds, I realize what I'm looking at. There've been scattered reports for several years now of something that drifts into the edges of our perceptual fields, almost always either emerging from or disappearing into eclipse behind a planet, an Oort Cloud body, or something else solid and reliable. The thing doesn't follow a reliable course, at least not when plotted in terms of four-dimensional space-time. Obviously it's moving in and out of the local continuum. Notes on the edges of my vision piped in from trans-convention archives explain that the Void Engineers have had no luck working out an overall pattern for its movements,

and that several expeditions (they're cagey about the details, but then I'd lie to them about my failures, too) just disappeared or failed to make any close approaches. So if I'd kept up better with briefings, I wouldn't be as surprised as I was just a moment ago.

Damn if the thing doesn't look like an eye. And then it gets worse. The swirls of what I understand are nebular gas form massive lids that open, and between them is a dust clot that's just too much like a pupil for comfort. It stares at me—

### *discontinuity*

I'm suddenly aware only of my own body. I'm back in the lab. The gear's all hooked up, but I can't make it work. Data will come in just fine for the HUDs inside the helmet, and the keyboards hum with tactile cues, but I'm shut off from sensory engagement or command of the satellites. I'm stuck at a level of command that we gave up half a century ago, and that even the mundane cutting edge is leaving behind.

I hope we get it fixed soon.

## MING XIAN

The historian Tacitus said of the Roman conquest of Britain, "They have made a desert and called it peace." Sometimes I think that the Uygur people did just the opposite: they made peace, and we called it a desert. Beijing and the national ministries are far, far to the east from here, and the

planners do not, I think, really grasp how anyone lives here. They look at the overall data, remember great stories and novels about the Tianshan mountains and the Taklamakan desert if they're of a literary bent, and treat the entire Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as one vast wasteland that must be made into something useful starting from scratch. Then those of us charged with actually doing the work come here from Beijing or Shanghai or Xian, find it very little like what we've been trained to expect, and do the best we can to make the grand regional plans fit the realities of life lived around oases and in sheltered valleys.

I'm freshly reminded of the gap between Beijing's dreams and the realities on the ground as I begin my semi-annual retreat. Behind me is the provincial capital of Urumqi, a typical twentieth century disaster of collapsing industry, overpopulation, and depleted natural resources. Ahead of me loom the Tianshans, some of the steepest and most forbidding mountains in the world. When I first came here, I shared the reaction of an American tourist on the same flight from Beijing: "I've seen paintings of mountains like these, but I thought that was just an artistic convention." They tower over the observer almost as if uprooted and ready to fall at any moment, but they never do. To the Politburo and subordinate planners, this is essentially unusable land, interesting only insofar as it provides roads, handy objects to use as border markers, and the occasional lucrative mine. And indeed for efforts to run a whole continent according to master plans, it's so. The people who live here have quite a different experience.

The scientists I work with tell me that glaciers carved out the sharp-edged valleys within which Uygur villages nestle. The villagers say that the mountains fought each other with knives and carved these wounds until Heaven made them stop. I've never been able to speak to the mountains themselves, but in the Yin realms, the ghosts say that the valleys are the beginning of the death of the mountains, sliding down in physical form as they will eventually pass across the wall between life and death. Perhaps they are all right, in their various ways. What matters to me now is that more paths than my Party masters realize wend through steep canyons and over rugged passes to small but lush, fertile fields and groves that one could see only from straight overhead. Here people live much as they have since the collapse of the Mongol empire centuries ago, and I keep their secret.

I have an official reason for this journey. The Office of Family Planning conducts occasional surveys in an effort to find out what the autonomous peoples are actually doing with the knowledge and goods that the Han people choose to give them. Officials back home then take the data, view it with conflicting agendas, and produce plans which may or may not work, but which we in the field will be held accountable for implementing. This year's driving concern is once again the use of Han names and language in the villages, as the Politburo would prefer that the Uygurs and other autonomous peoples become absorbed into the mass without the government being required to allow for physical assimilation. That would require mingling the races,

and putting already-limited jobs at the disposal of the minorities. But if they can just start naming their babies like us and speaking like us, the authorities reason, then all will be well.

I also have an unofficial reason. When I was seventeen, I sold my soul for power, or at least I began the process of doing so. My aunt Lin goaded me into it, but the choice was nonetheless mine. There is this about the witches of the Wu Keng: they do deliver on their promises. I got the various sorts of success a teenager dreams of, and the price was one I was willing to pay. The Wu Keng way begins with abasement: servitude to the elders of the art, and the alienation of one's self from one's old life. In me, perhaps, my aunt had made an unfortunate choice, since I was not nearly so disturbed about giving up a male existence as most of my fellow students seemed to be. There are the endless humiliations of being female in a society so thoroughly patriarchal as ours, but the existence is not itself a source of shame or humiliation for me. That may be why I eventually became such a terminal disappointment to my mentors. In time I separated myself from their order, and they did not take it kindly. Their displeasure manifested in the types of curses folklore so often—and in this case so rightly—associates with the term witch. My continued existence as a living woman thus requires rituals I cannot safely perform in the midst of any city.

This jeep I drive has a tag identifying it as US Army property assigned to Bahrain in 1969. I wonder sometimes just how it ended up abandoned in

an Urumqi parking lot two years ago, when I was looking for a replacement for my own just-expired truck. It had been well maintained, and I keep it up, so it serves me well as I move off the major roads onto tracks made for goats and ponies. For four days I head further and further back into the Tianshan hinterlands, along routes that local cartographers keep off the charts sent to Beijing. The air grows colder, but not cleaner. Even though I've left the cities behind, the winds still carry polluted dust off the steppes, all the way from the rotting wastelands left by the evaporating Aral Sea. Every west-facing surface gains a gray-brown coating that will last until the next rains.

I do stop in several villages and consult with the mayors and nurses I know. Resistance to the campaign for Chinese naming is just as intense as I expected. I write it all down in my personal notebook, and expect to figure out the proper selection and interpretation for the data later. I also plan to consult with my ancestors about it, as I have no wish to subject my hosts and confidants to the purges that I'm sure the government will want when it becomes clear that the Uygurs do wish to remain themselves. Out here among the peaks and crevasses, it's tempting to just abandon it all and go off to build another identity for myself. I've done it twice since leaving the Wu Keng, after all, so it's not like I don't know how to do it. But... time for that later.

On the fifth day I leave even the goat trails, and proceed carefully across country, along a seasonal river's dry bed, between almost vertical ridges.

Occasionally I pass the ruins of settlements abandoned during the civil wars, when Nationalists, Communists, and independent opportunists alike massacred whole villages. Slowly, slowly, nature takes them back, as weathering and mosses claim their due. I have to slow in places to make my way around open waste dumps and spots where iron rebar still pokes up through the dirt that's drifted in over the decades. At sunset on the sixth day I make my way on the last segment of the journey—on foot now, to keep my destination pure.

I know I've turned my steps right when a notch in the mountains lets me see a red glow rising off the far-off desert. On the threshold between this world and the spirit lands there's a lost civilization out there on the plateau. Nobody's actually seen its cities for centuries, maybe not for whole ages of the world. Their glow remains, though, when conditions are just right. Its presence now means that I am ever so slightly out of tune with the natural world behind me and further out of tune with the world of demographic analysts and rail yards where I live most of the time. It will be easier now to push the rest of the distance I need to go, and the light of the unseen cities will act as a beacon when it's time to return. Where this side canyon turns north, there's a small spring—barely more than a moist spot in the channel at this time of year—and I set up my camp there.

Through the rest of the night, I pace out the boundaries of my ritual space: five steps to a side for the innermost box, and larger and more complex forms around it. Doing this by starlight isn't the easi-

est thing in the world, and there's much opportunity to get it wrong. It all shimmers faintly as the night wears on, reproducing the essential features of the imperial capital's sacred geometry. There are no obvious points of discord, so just before sunrise I lie down in the center of it for a brief rest before the next step. My sleep is not comfortable, and troubled by dreams of firestorms raining down upon the landscape all around me. I know where these images come from, of course; I'll confront them in due time. I wake unhappy, but nonetheless ready to continue. I hear neither encouragement nor warning from my ancestors as I stir.

Crossing from the living world to the yin world is easy enough. Everyone does it at least once, when they die. The soul leaves the body and enters the realm where the dark and quiet energies prevail. Difficulties arise only for those who wish to return to life without having to reanimate a dead body, and for those who wish to avoid alerting the forces that watch the threshold between worlds. Both of those apply to me right now. This ritual of mingling with the ghosts is important to me for several reasons, and since the Wu Keng's ranks include powerful necromancers, I must proceed with great stealth. Thanks to my travels and the preparations I've made so far, my body has been largely purged of its associations with the bustling world of human life, and thanks to my meditations on the past and loss, my soul is thinking at least a little like a ghost.

I break my fast with a blend of poisonous and psychotropic plants, pulped and strained into a sort of lukewarm tea. Numbness quickly spreads through

me, and I am no longer directly aware of my body as it leans up against a rock within my improvised temple. My eyes get only a brief glimpse of the breaking dawn before sight fails along with my other senses. I am for a moment altogether alone in the emptiness that the sages say prefigures oblivion. Then the yin world begins to impress itself upon me, starting with the demoniac winds. Back when I was an apprentice, still learning my role as a girl among conspirators, the yin world was mostly calm. Sometimes harsh winds blew out of the voids below the ghost lands, but not very often. Something changed when the Jade Emperor last marched his ghostly armies off to war. A storm began that rages to this day, scouring the ghost lands as a hurricane would blast the living world if it blew without relief for year after year. That wind is the first thing I hear.

My soul is drifting loose of my body now, taking on a purer form without the complications of biology. I pause, drifting within the windswept darkness, and far off I hear the familiar laugh of one of the necromancers who taught me the killer's craft. They are not expecting me, I think, and if there is some disturbance to distract them... and there is. Something thuds against the wall around the living world between me and the Wu Keng's strongholds. I don't know what it is, and it scarcely matters. What matters is that the necromancers all focus on it long enough for me to make my crossing. Only the silver cord now connects me to my body, and I am but one more newly awakened ghost as far as the yin world is concerned. I stand beneath the cloudy muted skies, seeing faint echoes of the

sun that shines brightly on my body and feeling the winds plucking at the corpus of nearly pure yin force I now inhabit. Roads of dark soul-metal show me where I must go to keep my rendezvous.

The first blast of the current maelstrom was the worst. I walk through the remains of one of the Emperor's watchtowers. Before the storm, imperial soldiers stayed here. They'd march out in search of newly arrived ghosts and bring their targets back for evaluation, assignment to useful duties, or perhaps simple delivery to the forges that would strip away their identities and make them into the soul jade that is the currency and most common building material of this world. Now tower and soldiers alike have gone, leaving behind only a few nearly mindless husks that cling to some single memory connecting them to life. When that memory fades, they'll plummet into the hells waiting below. They know this, on some level, and they can sense the power within me, so they choose to make no trouble. The tower is filled with the sounds of scuttling as they get out of my way.

I pass down the dark road to a second tower, also ruined, and to a third which is intact but abandoned. Here several clans of Uygur ghosts dwell together, defending themselves against the spectres and predators of the yin world and doing such service as they can for their living descendants. They know me as the outsider who has been uncommonly kind to their daughters, and while they do not welcome anyone of the Jade Emperor's race, they at least see me as something other than an enemy. They raise the white jade gates and let me remain

on the road as I walk along a bend and down the slope that leads to my particular meeting place. A hard rain begins to fall as I pass out of the tower's view, the typical soft stuff of the yin world mixed with shards of bone and memory flensed out of unknown targets by the ongoing storm.

This little valley holds a row of graves laid down around the time that Alexander the Great's armies were stalled in Bactria. Among the men and women laid to rest—on opposite sides of a small ravine, to preserve the proprieties—are some of my ancestors. Their spirits roam widely through the yin world, and of course many of them aren't intact anymore. Time takes its toll in so many ways. But when I perform the traditional rites, all of them still able to answer the call, even the ones hastening toward dissolution. They offer whatever counsel they can, hoping that if I make wise choices, their lineage will continue. I have my doubts, but I believe or at least hope enough to come here when I'm considering something sufficiently serious.

In the twilight gloom, I begin the sacrifices. I use my own tears, squeezed out one by one, for a libation, and offer up strands of my hair in the constantly smoldering fire pit at the end of the row of graves. One by one, wisps of smoke spread out to circle over the graves, and the mist that looks like passing rain gathers, the first signs of the returning spirits. The moon rises, just short of full, ruddy and large. I've lost track of what time it will be when I return to my mortal body, but this doesn't have anything to do with that, anyway; it's a manifestation of the gathering lineage. The red tint is a sign

of trouble somewhere else not far away, in terms of the heart, in the yin world. It might come from deaths in a forest fire (or a factory fire), or the work of a necromancer, or something like that, and I'll need to be careful when I head home.

My ancestors take on increasingly solid forms as my prayers continue. Once a few of them gather, the others follow. Peer pressure and the drive to imitate don't stop with death, after all. But there's something strange about their manifestation this time. Instead of going through conventionally ghost-like stages toward the appearance of vitality, the mist that marks their attention and passion congeals into something heavy and gray. It's a lot more like stone than anything human. These ancestor-statues rumble faintly, and I can see cracks as though something inside is trying to break out. If this were anything like the forms of revenge I studied, I'd suspect the Wu Keng at work, but this isn't their style. If they'd found these graves, there'd have been a demon waiting for me, or something even more unpleasant. This unfamiliar prison marks some other influence altogether.

With growing unease turning into outright panic, I step from one statue to the next, trying to claw away the stone to release my ancestors. It doesn't work. I can peel off outer layers of rock in thin sheets like granite weakened by weathering, but there's always more underneath ready to rise up. Only the continuing influx of soul-mist tells me that there is anything further down. The ground beneath me grows muddy as I pace around and around. I'm not sure, but I think that the valley

basin is closing in a little. Certainly it seems now that I turn around in the midst of a circle of standing stones. It's pitch black down here at ground level, beyond the little light of my sacrificial fire, and the sky is almost devoid of stars. Only the still-ruddy moon keeps me company, and it's not much comfort.

The moon rises toward the zenith and pauses there, shining nearly straight down on me. Whatever is to happen next, the moon's lack of motion signifies, the environment is now set for it. I stop my panicked running and watch and listen.

A dozen statues crack simultaneously, and in precisely the same way. Plugs of rock fall out of their faces, leaving neat round channels right where their eyes should be. I can sense, I'm not quite sure how, that the shafts run back far beyond the back of each statue's head, into some other layer of the yin world, or perhaps into something stranger yet. Dim light kindles in each one, and more cracks form, allowing the heads to wobble precariously and to turn to follow me. I consider hiding, but decide that this is not the sort of gaze you can just quietly step away from. It will see me, and I might as well make it sooner than later.

I step up to the nearest of the statues, which has the general proportions of my great-grandfather, and stretch up slightly to peer into its hollow eyes. The eye shafts don't carry the sort of flickering reflections I'd expect from a distant fire. It's more like the steady shine of light reflected in a cat's eyes at night. And then the scarlet turbulence far back there makes sense to me. I realize that I'm looking

at the textures in the iris of a single very large eye, suffused with that red illumination. Just as I make to draw back, the eye blinks at me....

And just like that, I'm back in my body, beneath the Xinjiang Uygur skies. I'm sitting cross-legged, not far from my jeep, covered with a little evening dew.

I cannot sense the yin world.

Imagine waking to find that you cannot feel your arms or legs, or that you cannot hear. Once you've been awakened to the realities of existence without the vital spark, you feel it with you as intimately as any of your physical senses. This isn't something that just happens—someone or something must do it to you. I am the victim of an attack from a source I don't understand, and it's deprived me of crucial resources just as I know that my enemies are on the move toward me once more. I tremble very slightly as I stand up and get into the jeep. I say small prayers, hoping that perhaps my ancestors can hear me even though I can't hear them.

## ROBERT

Part of being a good shaman is learning the names, natures, and concerns of many spirits so that you can speak with them directly and build the alliances and partnerships that let you address the needs of your chosen community. Another part is learning who knows the spirits you don't, so that when a problem beyond your expertise arises, you

can go get help. We spend most of our time practicing alone, but in our travels in the spirit world (and sometimes in the material world as well), we do get to know each other, and we do consult on matters of mutual concern. If the worlds' shamans can be said to form a coherent magical tradition—and we do say so, one we call Dreamspeakers, thank you very much—then it is based almost entirely on those encounters and the tradition of mutual assistance.

If I could travel into the spirit world as I usually do, I could seek out any number of sources myself. There is, for instance, the Beached Whale, a half-dead thing dwelling by a cold pool on a mountain very far from the material world. It speaks of everything that is, and everything I can think of that will be, in the past tense: it seems somehow anchored in the last moments of the universe. No doubt it could tell me something useful... if only I could get there. But the whole point of this tallying is that I can't.

So now I need a person living on this side of the Gauntlet, someone I can talk to through purely material senses. A name occurs to me: Tareq Omar Belim. Admittedly, Tareq sometimes seems to push the boundaries of "living," but then he has an excuse. He and I are part of the same graduating class of new shamans, so to speak. He awoke to his inner nature the same week I did. But for him it was much worse. Up until the start of that week, he'd been a simple tailor living in the town of Benapole, providing a pretty decent living for his family with fine needlework. Seven days later, they were dead, along

with a million others, drained of their blood and spirit by an ancient horror, and he'd seen it all. The shock of it tore the lid off his inner eye, and he's never been able to close it since.

Tareq is unusual among shamans in that he has no power at all to travel in the spirit world or to command any spirits. (He can of course try to persuade them, and he's gotten quite good at it.) What he does better than anyone else as new to the calling as we are is *see*. He sees the spirits of life and death, of organization and decay, of energy and flux and time. Even our revered masters don't all have such a broad field of vision; we almost all specialize to one degree or another. Tareq sees it all.

After the death of his family and his recovery from the nearly fatal wounds he suffered in the fires the horror started, he sold off his worldly goods and began traveling. He's driven to make sense of it all, to see patterns behind the apparently random proliferation of individual spirits. We met in Tokyo a couple of years ago, and he made a deep impression on me. All shamans suffer for our power one way or another, but his inner scars were so deep, so thorough, that I was humbled in his presence in a way I seldom am. And I still have his phone number.

I know that he lives on Bangladesh time wherever he can. That's ten hours ahead of New York, but since it's nearly midnight now I decide to make the call. It's been a while since I did any international dialing, but I look it all up and make the call. After four rings, he answers, in that tired but intense voice. "Hello?"

"Tareq, this is Robert Blanclege. You gave me this number in Tokyo."

"Yes, Robert, I remember. You listened with respect and spoke with courtesy. What brings you to me now?"

"I have a problem, and I need advice." I pause, but it seems he's waiting for me to say more. So I explain my encounters and my current inner blindness. He asks insightful questions and quickly grasps the situation.

"Hmm," he says at last. "You are encountering things associated with the end."

"Yes. Yes, that's it. The end of the spirits, and the apocalypse of the red star—its lore, reports of its activity, anything like that."

"I could speak to you of Krishna and Kali, but I am not sure it would do you much good." Tareq never overtly jokes and seldom smiles, at least in my experience, but he sometimes displays that wry wit. "You will I think have an easier time with your own people's symbols." He says it like that, too, all in a breath without any verbal punctuation. "Seek Revelation and Ragnarok."

## WILLIAM

I manage to conceal the full extent of my impairment from my colleagues and supervisors. Even with this sudden cybernetic constriction, I'm a clever son of a bitch, better at the games of office politics than most of them. One of the most important secrets to deception is knowing how much of the truth to use, since the best lies tend to be matters of false context and implication rather than false denotation.

So I report quite truthfully that the new array seems to be working fine, but that I experienced some discomfort using it, and I recommend some trials with other observers. I add, also truthfully, that it makes sense to build up the ranks of qualified users as quickly as possible so that we don't have to depend so much on other monitoring teams. That actually earns me a small but significant commendation from the project leader, who's always on about the importance of unit self-sufficiency as the prerequisite for effective inter-unit collaboration. Then I request and get an assignment to data collation, where they're constantly having trouble extracting the right kind of useful information from the mounds of raw data and where I can perhaps find some answers for my own predicament.

The first thing I find is that searching with "red star" as a primary term is even more of a waste than I expected. It looks like someone's seen an ominous red light in the sky pretty much every year since the beginning of recorded astronomy, and often in close proximity to interesting or unusual events. Well, no shit. Interesting and unusual events happen all the time, because we live in a universe that's big enough and full enough of events that even the improbable ones get to happen more than human intuition would suggest. Our brains are wired to filter out the low-probability interpretations of perception and reasoning. Usually it's a good thing, but it means that when something comes along that demands attention despite being low probability, observers tend to freak out. Add in the perceived significance attached to anything bright and red against a dark background, and it's a mess.

At this point I'm interrupted by a real crisis. The Aral Sea is a now-dead sea in what used to be the Soviet Union and is now, depending on how you count it, divided between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, or Kazakhstan and Karakalpakistan, or whatever. Soviet policy of massive irrigation started draining the lake in the fifties, and now it's about ten percent the size it was in 1960, and getting smaller all the time. The resulting rise in salinity killed off all the sturgeon and assorted other salt-water fish that used to thrive in the Aral. What were once successful fishing villages are now weird ghost towns dozens of miles from any remaining water. We've had problems in the past with the desert winds carrying off the salt left behind as the sea evaporates, because it's loaded with every bit of toxic crap washed down into the sea from factories and pesticide-loving farms upstream and from the Soviet weapons testing and storage facilities on islands in the sea.

Well, they used to be islands. That's the problem: evaporation's gone so far as to join several of the islands to the mainland, so that anyone willing to hoof it across a few miles of salty toxic wasteland can help themselves to anything the Soviets left behind and the Kazakhs haven't yet messed with. We know that entrepreneurial colonels assigned to the area have sold off some of the crud themselves but the real problem is with the professional scavengers. They come in with trucks and cranes and can strip an ex-Soviet facility down to the walls in short order, then haul the loot to willing buyers in any major settlement in one of the ex-Soviet republics, western China, Pakistan, Ar-

menia, or a whole lot of places, many of them hard to monitor.

The crisis goes like this:

**Day 1, 2230 hours:** Our atmospheric monitors notice an increase in half a dozen carcinogens in the vicinity of the Aral Sea. It's early in the morning the next day there. The sun is up, so scavengers can be at work.

**Day 1, 2240 hours:** We start monitoring Kazakh and Russian signal traffic. They don't seem to be aware of it. The external response unit starts debating how much to tell them and in what ways.

**Day 1, 2255 hours:** Our follow-up scan from a maneuverable satellite with better sensors identifies specific biological weapons and three compounds we're not sure about, and it further establishes that the plumes originate from the western shore of the Aral Sea.

**Day 2, 0020 hours:** We still can't get a good lead on the three unknown compounds, but we decide not to wait. We dispatch a field team of our own, with the equipment necessary for erecting both quarantine and sterilization zones. None of us really want to talk about it, but we're all pretty sure that it will come down to sterilization. And much as I sneer at human fallibility, having to kill any significant number of them isn't just a failure; it's damnably depressing.

**Day 2, 0115 hours:** Inter-operations analysis coughs up an identification for one of the three compounds, and it's nasty shit. There were early experiments with chemical warfare in the nine-

teenth century in Germany and Britain, with a handful of forward-thinking military officers sponsoring a handful of death-fascinated chemists in side wings of factories, remote cottages, and the like. This is one of those, a hybrid gunk four steps removed from aniline dyes that makes nerves fire repeatedly without opportunity to reset, so that the victim dies of spasms and exhaustion. Our records give no indication that anyone has made any of it since 1924, and we're going to have to find out (later) how the Soviets stumbled onto it. For the moment, we warn the incoming field team about it. Their existing safe-suit procedures should cover it, but it's one more thing to watch for out in the drift zone.

**Day 2, 0150 hours:** First report of a related death in Kazakh police records. They don't seem aware of the leak itself, but the account of a drunk who dies of massive hemorrhaging and outbreaks of scaly skin around his joints is indicative of the presence of one of many creations from Nazi scientists the Soviets grabbed at the end of World War II.

**Day 2, 0230 hours:** The field team's on the spot, and yes, it is a manmade breach at North Containment Facility #3 on the former island of Vozrozhdeniya. The perps are dead on the scene, which is satisfying in its way. It looks like... The team's report pauses for a moment to confirm analysis, and then proceeds. It looks like the damn fools lost control of one of their trucks parked on a slight rise near the westernmost warehouse, and the truck just plain rolled down the hill, picking up enough speed to breach the wall and then catch on fire. If the perps

weren't already dead, the field team would delightedly push the limits of Union policy on torture.

**Day 2, 0305 hours:** The field team gets in their first appraisal just as more reports of deaths show up in the official records. Some folks in the district capital even wonder if there's a weapons leak, but for some reason don't link it to Vozrozhdeniya; they're concerned about something off to the north that our map shows was thoroughly decontaminated in 1995. Good for them, since it means less chance of interference with our work.

**Day 2, 0340 hours:** The field team's got the leaks all sealed, and sets off some clean hot charges all around to get the worst build-ups of toxic discharge in the vicinity. When they leave, they'll set some explosives to make it look like a brushfire broke out and did some of the hazmat work for whoever shows up to do it.

**Day 2, 0400 hours:** At this point we're breaking out the stimulants. It's early afternoon in Kazakhstan and the death toll's rising. This is where I get to do my thing. Unfortunately, because of this damnable cyber-blindness, I do it a lot more slowly and badly than I would otherwise. I should be in full cyber projection, cruising through the primitive computers in the region and fooling with data on the fly. Instead, I'm working with purely external tools, nothing more sophisticated than chord keyboards and my old macro package. With my usual rig, I could probe some of the environment around each computer and do basic hacks on teletypes and such. Not now. People are going to die because of whatever it was glaring at me from space.

**Day 2, 0430 hours:** The field team's got a suggestion that gets immediately bumped up the ladder. They want to fire the smaller of the two oil pipelines running beneath the main mass of the toxic plumes. Their back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that this'll neutralize a lot of the most dangerous material and replace a biochem crisis with one that more conventional means can address. I'm in favor of it and attach a note to that effect, then get back to work. To my complete lack of surprise, here's the evidence linking those dead perps to the local government: their boss was the cousin of the Vozrozhdeniya southern garrison and an in-law of some sort to the mayors of three nearby towns. About what I expected, but annoying just the same, and I send some of that data off to newspapers in Ankara, Moscow and New York.

**Day 2, 0445 hours:** I screw the pooch.

Well, it's a little more complicated than that. I run into security way beyond anything I'd expect in a small town's post office. Poking reveals a whole cluster of astoundingly sophisticated local networks, with an extremely idiosyncratic style. What we've got here is a spontaneous talent, one of those individuals who could develop into someone fit for our sort of work, or could become a real asset to one or another of our enemy factions. Furthermore, I can see that whoever it is, he's improving very rapidly in his competence, judging from the activation dates. I get desperate, and I get stupid. I decide to slot in some of my customized identity analyzers. I don't even think of them as cyberware....

And suddenly I pass out for a moment, and come to lying on the floor, my wheelchair tipped over. Someone's pulled the implants out of their sockets in my chair, and I'm getting a blast of pure oxygen from a portable respirator. I look up at the floor manager and croak out, "Data type mismatch." To myself, I say, "I've got to get away from this for a while."

## MING XIAN

The spiritual weakness that mysterious force thrust upon me has an unexpected consequence. Most people go through their lives unaware of the yin and yang realms and encountering no direct manifestations of them. Some grow into a full awareness, and speak to the spirits and travel among the many lands in which they dwell. In between, there is a category of unfortunate souls who can just barely perceive the realms beyond the Wall, who are haunted by things they're unable to comprehend or address. It is into that middling condition that I've fallen.

Wherever things live, there are yin reflections of their vulnerabilities and eventual deaths. A skilled reader of omens can perceive the future in them. The haunted cannot, but can see the impending end in the face of every living thing. So it is that I see old age in this man, crushing and fire in that one, disease in these children and cattle, and so on. I also sense that my ancestors and perhaps other ghosts are trying to contact me, but all I can receive are incomprehensible whispers, the tiniest fluttering breezes, a passing chill. They chase

me in enclosed rooms and open thoroughfares alike, not doing me (or themselves) any good, and increasing my misery with each passing day.

A week of this has me on the brink of collapse. I can't focus on my work, and have arranged leave, with an excuse about exposure to one of the mountain diseases. There's always something of the sort making the rounds, treatable but unpleasant, and it makes a convenient cover for any of us needing a little time off for reasons that would not look so good on official records. But that doesn't help when it's time to sleep, or to go out shopping, or anything else. Wherever I am, there the ghosts are. Where the Wall is particularly thin, there are also manifestations: water tainted by blood, the reek of grave mold, shadows where there should be bright light. It doesn't seem that the ghosts hear me, or at least nothing I can say either as conversation or as ritual propitiation does any good. I stagger through the days and toss and turn during the nights.

On a whim, or so it seems, I decide to travel. I cash out one of the small savings accounts I've maintained with a local banker and buy a set of train passes. There will of course be checkpoints and examiners to deal with, but my official identification supplemented by readily available forged travel vouchers should suffice to get me past them. I worry briefly about dealing with the forger, a crooked little woman whose daughter and granddaughter I've helped at the office, but I decide that until such time as Heaven tells me I'm at liberty to die, I must live (so as to continue to serve), and this seems to be the price of continued life, or at

least continued sanity. I shall make amends later, perhaps.

For a few hours, there is indeed blessed relief. The train labors up narrow valleys, through steep passes, and gradually down to the plains on the far side. It's tremendously noisy, but it is (to my deafened soul) a purely physical noise. There's nothing haunting in it. That night I sleep deeply, dreaming complex dreams in which that ghastly encounter with something using my ancestors interweaves itself with parables and historical accounts of demons corrupting the foolish. And when I wake, the whispering is back.

The second day on the train, I undertake a rather desperate exercise. I know how to do it in principle, but it's not anything I ever expected to need or want to do. Now, though... Yes, I must further isolate myself from yin and yang, bind myself more closely to the material world, at least until I can find some better accommodation with my current unhappy state.

It begins with intoxication. No matter how much the rail authority may seek to ban it, there's always cheap liquor to be had on long-distance trains; I've never bought from its vendors, but some of my clients have mentioned the routine in passing as we discussed other matters. So I make my approach with confidence, and in not very many minutes and for fewer yuan than I expected, I have more than enough of what claims to be vodka to render myself nearly unconscious. I have a final meal to fortify myself and set to work getting to that stage of intoxication.

Once there, I find it as difficult as I expected to perform the necessary meditation. In fact, at first I just fall asleep. It takes half a dozen tries to complete a single utterance of the mantra of the inward-turning soul, and half a dozen tries to complete the second. I stagger through the whole thing, with many false starts and stops. Still, bit by bit I do feel the haunting recede. It's as though the sources are growing distant even as they remain at hand, the empty space between us and the bones beneath my skin thickening to absorb more of the unwanted sights and sounds. As the second day gives way to the second night and we lumber across the southern reaches of the Yellow River, I move further and further from my gifts.

By the time I disembark in Chongqing a week later, my spirit is not readily distinguishable from any of the many others around me.

## ROBERT

Tareq's last word reminds me of something, and I rummage through the bulging notebook in which I keep contacts and reference. Yes, here it is, a handbill for a bunch of Michigan death rockers in concert, including a solo act who just calls himself Anders. Every time I pick the sheet up, the "e" in his name wraps itself into the shape of an eye and winks at me. I take this as a sign. And this time, unlike my previous efforts to contact him, there's no defensive spirit barrier to get through. He wraps himself in layers of protection and distance, and last time around I couldn't call or write him at all. Every number would be wrong, every envelope lost

or delivered to the wrong address. The Rubbish told me, "He speaks when he knows he must speak."

He's got a website. It sucks, of course. Either he did it himself or one of his buddies did it, and it's got the usual clutter of poorly formatted text and images, plus a constellation of pop-up banners courtesy of the sleazy Web hosting service he uses. On the page labeled "Contact Anders," there isn't anything like a conventional phone number. There's a set of pictograms, which I gradually realize mark out a location in the spirit realms, a path of approach and guardians to recognize and deal with along the way. That would be great, if only I hadn't encountered the red star. As it is, I'll have to make more phone calls.

Somewhere in the hinterlands of Nebraska, there's a century-old farm operated by a single middle-aged man. He looks now like the farmers around him, but up until a few years ago he was the number two man at the number three music publisher in Hollywood. He's also quite a potent spirit-talker, not a full-blown shaman but someone with a knack that goes beyond the standard abilities of a medium, and also a fairly good alchemist. I was impressed, when he told me his story, to learn that he'd built up his art all on his own, his only guides the spirits who lurked under his bed and in his closet. Eventually he lost control of it, and that's where I came in.

After a New Years' Eve 2000 party that apparently included more than usually philosophical conversation, he went home and tried to conjure up the Nine Muses. This is an astoundingly bad

idea. There aren't exactly the muses people usually think of when they say "the Nine Muses," but there are awfully powerful spirits that do delight in inspiring creative acts and who've taken on some of the personality traits projected onto them by their seekers. The Mogul, as the Rubbish liked to call this guy, managed to retain enough control to send the muses back before they fully manifested, so he only had half his house destroyed, but his subconscious yearning to get back to his own days in a band attracted swarms of semi-conscious destructive spirits who turned his life into something like outtakes from *Poltergeist*.

I got to know him a couple weeks later. He was camping out on the beach then, to avoid loosing the spirits to do any more damage to his home or office. His car and tent were wrecked and his clothes intermittently shredded. I'd come to try out the local surf, which I heard was good for my new passion of boogie board surfing, and here was this shambling catastrophe straddling the material and spirit worlds. What could I do but offer to help? I asked in ways that made it clear that I knew what I was talking about, and we began what turned into weeks of conversation. Together we did get his act cleaned up. When that was done, he decided that he was ready for a change of pace anyway, sold off his interests in the company, and headed out to Nebraska.

We've stayed in touch a bit since then, so it's not a total surprise when I call. "Bob!" he exclaims with real pleasure. "What can I do for you? Another loan?"

"No, but thank you. No, I need contact info."

"Fair enough. Who for?" I hear him flipping open the Rolodex he keeps on his desk. His Palm Pilot has lots more addresses in it, but he always starts with the physical.

"A death rocker, name of Anders."

The Mogul gets serious then. "He's another one of yours, isn't he?" He always thinks of me as some master shaman, and occasionally it's embarrassing, but this time I let it pass.

"He is."

"So why don't you just astrally project or whatever it is you call that thing? Heroquesting, that's the one."

That's a good question, but I don't think I want to go into it right now. "Something's come up that makes it a good idea to contact him physically. Long story."

"Okay. Tell it to me sometime. In the meantime..." He riffles through the Rolodex. Then there's the beep of his Palm Pilot coming on. Beep, click, click. "Right, here you go." He reads off a cell phone number for me. "And when this is all done, come and tell me the story, yeah?"

"Sure," I say, and mean it.

I look at Anders' phone number for a while. No obvious numerology of interest in it, no cryptograms jumping out at me. I wish I could talk it over with the Rubbish, but I was good at puzzles before I ever met my totem and I have some confidence in my analysis. So finally I give it a call. It's an answering machine. I leave my name and that of the Mogul, and say, "I'd like to talk with you about Ragnarok."

Then I wait.

He doesn't call that day, or the next. On the third day, there's a call that my caller ID system says originates in Norway. Puzzled, I answer. "Hello, Robert Blanclege here."

The guy on the other end is gruff and hoarse. "This is Anders. You wouldn't have my number if at least one of my friends didn't think you'd be worth talking to. So tell me, what do you want to talk about Ragnarok for?"

I decide to dive right in. "I saw the red star, and it cut me off from spirit walking. A friend of mine said I should be thinking about apocalypse."

He's quiet for a moment, and I can hear the random surges of static in the transatlantic connection. "I think maybe you'd better come out here. Can you make a flight to Norway?"

"Sure, if I know where I'm going."

"Take a note." He reels off addresses and directions. "Make it fast."

So it is that twenty-three hours later I'm driving along a side road just south of the Arctic Circle, having gone from New York to Trondheim to Mo i Rana by successfully smaller planes, and then from there by car. I was pleased to find that I retain some of the shaman's habitual luck even with this spirit blindness: no waits, smooth connections, good service. It cost me a lot, but I had most of the cash necessary and ran up the rest on my credit card; I'll have time to make arrangements before the bill comes due, I hope.

After an hour and some of twisty driving in and out of sight of the fjords, I come to the last

marker Anders described to me. Silver Cottage, that's the place. I turn and embark on a truly hair-raising set of switchbacks right down to the waterline. There's a strip of beach that looks like it should just wash away, but apparently hasn't, with a well-made cabin under a single massive ash tree.

Hanging from it is a naked man, white-skinned beneath the hair and dirt, heavily scarred and tattooed. When he sees me park, he swings himself up, unties his feet, and drops easily to the gravel that makes up the beach. He watches calmly as I get out and approach, and lets me make the first move.

"I, uh, I'm Robert," I say at last.

"Anders." He doesn't offer me a handshake or anything. He also doesn't seem particularly bothered to be speaking naked to a stranger. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have that kind of confidence. "Come on," he adds with a tilt of his head toward the cabin. "I've been talking with the squirrel, but I'm about ready to go on in, and it's not like it'd do you any good right now if what you say is true."

"The squirrel?" I'm confused. "Oh, yeah, Ratatosk."

"That's the one."

"I thought he lived on Yggdrasil or someplace exotic like that."

Anders laughs then, a very deep and hearty laugh that sounds awesomely suited to being laughed over a city being sacked. "He does." He waves a hand at the tree overhead. "What do you think this is, anyway? Symbolism, man. Just big fucking symbolism."

"Ah, right. Sorry, I'm feeling lagged."

"No problem. We'll get you either woken up or well put back to sleep. I've got some of the best damn brews you've ever tasted." Pause again. "Tell me you do drink, please."

"Oh yes."

"That's okay, then. I was just thinking you might be one of those damn hippy shamans with the vegan diet and the no smokes and all. Fucking cowards messing it up for the rest of us, getting spirits accustomed to being coddled and respected instead of *commanded*. If you were, I'd make you wait outside." He looks serious. "I don't want any pussies weakening the will of the house."

"I'm old-school," I assure him. "I hunt to kill and eat what I get, I know the power in tobacco weed and pipe, I know where to cut and when." I roll back a sleeve to show him the old scars all around my left elbow.

"Okay, then," he repeats. "So tell me the rest of the story."

I lay it all out for him, as carefully as I can.

"Man, that sucks."

"Yes sir, it does," I say. "I'm missing my totem and all the rest."

"Aw, not that," he says dismissively. "Fuck all that. You'll figure it out or not. No, I mean that when I started hearing about this kind of thing, I was really hoping it was just one of those fads. But I'm hearing it too damn often, all up and down the world ash. Stars falling down, dead giants waking up, flood and fire, it's looking a lot like Ragnarok. And I was really hoping to be better prepared for it."

"The actual end of the world?" I'm skeptical, and I suspect it shows.

"Look, the fucker's gotta end *sometime*, right? Here we are smack dab in the middle of it all: Y2K past, 2012 and the harmonic convergence coming up, the whole deal. Everybody's staking out their turf, and I aim to be in the middle of it all." He's off and running with exposition on prophecies that mostly passes me by.

"Uh, yeah," I say when he seems to be at a natural break.

And so the conversation goes, all night. We spend some time establishing our respective levels of cluefulness, comparing experiences in the spirit world. It develops that he's actually met my first mentor, Xoca, a couple of times, and formed the same combination of opinions I hold about him. "He's a great man, or would be if he weren't fucking nuts," as Anders puts it. At some point we talk about death scenes: what we wish for, what we expect, what we fear. Anders lays out his desire to die in the midst of a very prominent performance someplace nobody's performed before, and lists half a dozen major landmarks in Europe and North America. He may not be all that stable, but he's never dull.

## DANTE

One of the things they don't tell you about becoming one with the universe is that you don't automatically get understanding to go with everything you're experiencing.

In the state I'm in now, whatever "now" means to someone like me, a great many things flash by that are just mysteries to me. Here's a man who is at once a human being and a werewolf (or something like it) and a unique channel of power and a pile of ashes in the dark. That's his whole life there. What does it mean? I don't know; I only feel a particularly intense hatred about him in the minds of nearly everyone whose lives connect to his through channels of destiny and synchronicity. Here's a mind open to me, filled with thoughts as complex as my own were back when I lived in just one body and one moment at a time. And not a single one of them is comprehensible to me: no recognizable language, words, sensory input, anything. Is it someone insane? Is it a mind that was never human? Unless I neglect other duties, I cannot get any sense that I'll ever know.

Another thing they don't tell you is just how much of the trans-temporal world is symbolic. I sometimes feel like the whole universe turned out to be a theologian or poet or a Hermetic or something. It's not even contextualized and adaptive symbols, a lot of the time; it's deriving its manifestations from layers of existence still further removed from normal experience than mine. It's a good thing I always liked riddles and puzzles, I suppose, as I spend much of my awareness deciphering the flow of usually cryptic symbols around and through me.

I struggle with the terms to express how things change in the realms outside time. I live in the midst of what some living magi call Correspondence, the network of connections that have nothing to do

with physical location. I used to manipulate these bonds unconsciously, then consciously as (if I do say so myself) one of the best hackers and social engineers of the twentieth century, and now as intimately and directly as I ever did my own body. I escaped out of mundane existence into something like the universe's operating system. Speaking of past and future doesn't really do justice to it, but then the whole human mind is built to live in time rather than eternity. I could invent new terms, but then I'd just have to explain them to you anyway. So I'll act as though what you know as sequence mattered here, for simplicity's sake.

The Umbra is getting crowded. More and more new symbols, and redefinitions all around of the ties between existing symbols and their meanings and signifieds. Intimations of Judgment (with the capital J) multiply. I cycle through the Umbral landscapes looking for patterns, hoping that I can find out what it is in the future responsible for this activity before future becomes present. For reasons not yet clear to me, simply shifting into future time is a lot harder than it used to be: too much congestion, too much divergence and convergence of possibilities, so that stable identity doesn't last long enough for me to learn anything useful. To use a symbol of my own, if my life in union with the power of Correspondence (with the capital C) so far has been like climbing around a hilly landscape, up ahead there are mountains with cliffs.

Here comes another of these future-linked entities. Fortunately, its symbolism is easy enough to unravel: I'm looking at three individual Awakened

minds, two male and one female, who will be connected but don't know it yet. One of the men is lame, the other crippled, and the woman has a knot of ambiguity in her identity. They've all been struck by something that left bright red marks in their limbic systems, distorting some of their perceptions and a lot of their ability to control parapsychological phenomena, what they think of as shamanism or yin sensitivity or whatever. Something wounded each of them in the same place, and the psychic scars of it are starting to tie them together.

As they make their collective way across the ontological and semiotic ripples around us, they can't see me. I'm beyond their consciousness right now, still tied as it is to a straightforward approach to causality. I have the opportunity to trace them forward and back in time. It's a tangled mess, and part of me is inclined to leave it all well enough alone: it's tricky at best to mess with fate. But then my own life is, I know, tied up with fate too, and either the whole universe soon will be or I'm going to be locked out of the parts that aren't. So I tell myself that maybe this could be a good learning experience.

I soon find that I can approach their shared moment of crisis only through an extremely dense thicket of symbols. Whatever it is they encountered, it's rendered in the engrammic memory of their trans-temporal projections as that damn Red Eye that shows up in so many visions these days. The context is quite different for each of them, so I suspect that the blazing eye is some sort of conceptual contamination; certainly there are plenty of ways they could

each have been infected by the same imagery. In any event, thanks to the Red Eye's looming power, they've settled on rendering their impairment through the lens of blindness. That's an interesting choice. Experience tells me that if I were to speak to them, I'd probably find them uncertain about their acquired power. This usually gets bundled up with self-doubt of various kinds. But this is not the moment for that. A sense of urgency draws me on.

Here, a few steps into the future, their paths twine together more closely than usual. I hear an echo. (All right, a sense a recurrence of certain patterns in the organization of their psyches. My mind prefers to render these things with some sensory cues.) It links back to... yes, here we go. It links for each of them to that formative moment when the higher neurogenetic circuits opened in their respective brains and they could exercise normally latent potential. People who think of this ability as magic call the experience Awakening. Christian (or pseudo-Christian, depending on who you ask) visionaries call it the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whatever. It's all the same thing. For reasons not yet clear to me, the wounds inflicted by whatever's under the mask of the Red Eye are blocking a conceptual link from that awakening to a crucial point in their shared future.

On a whim, I decide to speak to them. This isn't as easy as you might think.

I think briefly about trying to appear to each of them separately, but that's too much effort. Better to try manifesting in conjunction with the trine as a single entity. I recall the features I had in life, and

pull up reflections in the medium to check it. I am reminded that I was, not to put too fine a point on it, hot stuff: mature but nowhere near middle aged, bright-eyed, trim, dressed sharp. If there were ever to be a movie about the history of the Virtual Adepts, I always thought, I should be played by Denzel Washington. I've still got it. (Of course I've still got it, a future self reminds me. Where would it go? I ignore it. A man needs his moment of vanity.) My voice will sound strange to them, but there's nothing I can do about that without a great deal more preparation than I think desirable right now.

Then I take a step forward, and start to speak.

## WILLIAM

I decide to try the truth again, and tell the management that I'm feeling worn out after too much time spent with still-experimental gear and that I think I might do better with some time away from the implants. I have a solid record of success, and part of that is knowing when to stop. The bosses decide to grant me the time I want. As it happens, they say, there's this little list of errands they'd like done: messages to be delivered with the security of personal delivery, oversight to be rendered, conflicting reports to be sorted out on the spot, and so forth. Important work for the cross-convention effort that is Project Ragnarok, which is the organizational grouping two levels above Sunburst. (In other words, they're the Department of Defense and we're the Naval Observatory.) Would I enjoy making such a trip? Why, yes, I would, and in short order I'm packed and on my way.

A friend of mine in college had a bumper sticker that read: COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT: YOUR BEST ENTERTAINMENT VALUE. He was wrong, though. For really satisfying entertainment on the cheap, very little compares to a fine evening out funded by one of your enemies. Credit fraud is your best entertainment value.

It's a great afternoon in Hong Kong, the skies momentarily empty and blue after one of those sudden downpours has blown over. The Peak Tower, looking like some pagoda's entry arch on the best growth hormone ever, offers some wonderful views: the whole of the island and most of Kowloon are perfectly clear. Even the very limited optic enhancements I can manage at the moment contribute their bit. I spend a while tracking randomly selected babes, making notes in my handheld about the places they gather so that I can go cruising later, then I go into a broader search mode for any colleagues or enemies I might want to deal with. From time to time a waiter stops by to freshen my drink, and I tip him very generously out of Dr. Kung's credit.

Eventually Dr. Kung will notice, of course, but then that's part of the exercise. I'm testing him, I'll tell the security goons if they notice inconveniently soon. For all that he talks big, he didn't manage to do anything about Hong Kong's hematovore problems until they actually attacked his damn lab, and even then his assistants did a lot of the heavy lifting. I need to convince the Ragnarok bigwigs that he's unreliable, and I figure that this is as good a way as any to do it. So I hired a local con man to

get Kung's wallet and papers in a simple pickpocket and snatch. I'm keeping the receipts for all of this to buttress my argument. I'm sort of hoping he doesn't notice until I can check out more than one of those babe magnets I'm seeing.

At first I don't notice the man standing at the window next to me and my wheelchair. American, I think after a look—the African-descended people in Southeast Asia are usually darker skinned. I consider offering him a drink, but decide not to. He's not my type, after all. I go back to examining the view.

"Mr. Mr. Alba. Mr. Castle. Alba. Mr. Albacastle," he says, quietly. It's one of the strangest sounds I've ever heard out of an apparently unaugmented human throat, and I've heard Tuvaluan throat-singers and others at the edges of human potential. His voice comes out stacked on top of itself in a way that far exceeds any ventriloquist act I know of, and it seems like it took him a while to get the syllables all in order. I look up. He doesn't seem to be stoned, though as I know myself, there's a lot you can take to leave you thoroughly blissed out in the most formal and conservative of settings.

"Pardon?" Keep it neutral, I tell myself. It's daytime, so this probably isn't one of our targets, but it could easily be someone in their service, or someone else out for revenge. Being the world's secret policeman does mean building up a list of enemies.

"Mr. Ms. Mr. Castle. Ming. Robert. Albacastle." He pauses. "Mr. William Albacastle."

I don't say anything this time. I haven't the faintest idea what he's up to, if he's not a robot run-

ning a scratch mix with his own memories. But a random American guy in Hong Kong who knows my full name just is not what I consider good news.

He tries again. "My name is Dante. I believe you've heard of me."

That gets my attention. The world is full of Dantes, but not that many who are black men with American accents who know the names of Project Ragnarok operatives. To the best of my knowledge there's just one of them, and... "Yup. Last I heard, you were dead, all blown up when your Digital Web burned down, fell over, and sank into the swamp. You're looking very tangible for a man in your condition."

He smiles. "We'll have that conversation another time. What I need to tell you now is just this: the cure for your blindness is back where you first saw the rest of the world."

"Gone into being an oracle, have we? I imagine the money's good. 'See the Dead Hacker! Hear the future through the mouth of the man once plagiarized and denounced by Richard Stallman, now come to tell you all!'" Damn. He doesn't rise to the bait.

"I realize it's a bit cryptic, but you'll understand once you think about it." He pauses. "That's all. All. Think. It."

And then just like that he's gone. Empty air. No intruding, so he didn't teleport out, or if he did, he filled up the hole with air. Just gone.

My drink doesn't taste so good now.

## MING XIAN

The alleys are cold and damp, but I don't mind. It's easy enough to add another layer of jacket or overcoat if I need it, and the wet pavement and looming dark buildings carry echoes of sounds I need to hear. If anyone is following me, they'll give themselves away unless they're managing to move very, very quietly indeed, and anyone who can do that is likely not someone I can defend myself against in any event. I'll take opportunities like this where I can find them.

The air reeks even more than usual. Some particular convergence of wind and the channeling effects of the street grid here plunges me into a visible miasma of river pollution. I try to breathe shallowly and through my mouth rather than my nose, but breath discipline can only do so much. There are thirty million people stuffed into Chongqing's sprawl with no master sewage system. Their effluvia is more than I can manage, and I regard not passing out as a minor triumph, under the circumstances.

I still have the knives of those last would-be assassins, tucked beneath two layers of coat. I can feel the faint hum of their enchantment, dissipating along with the souls of their wielders. If it weren't for this cursed isolation in the living world, I could interrogate the departing spirits and perhaps learn something of use, but as it is I can only take comfort in the fact that they are indeed departing. Once I find a place to rest, I can study the documents they had on them. I hope there's something useful there, as this long pursuit is taking its toll.

I turn the corner onto a street with rail tracks down the middle. The river is somewhere off to my left now, and I get a brief glimpse of the manufactured "downtown" with its earnest neon and thin facades of nightlife glamour. Nothing moves nearby... and then something does. I hear a footstep, and then I see a man in the street, straight ahead. There wasn't time for him to emerge out of any of the side streets or buildings. Either he has enhanced speed, enough to pose a very serious threat to me, or he managed to shift in without going through mundane distances. Neither prospect encourages me. Someone lacking my awareness of the environment would likely blame herself for having missed the man's presence earlier, or assume he'd come out of a building, or something of the sort, since our minds work hard to present the world as coherent and consistent. Part of the magician's burden is learning how often it's neither of those.

He's silhouetted by the lamps up the block, so I can only make out his general proportions. When he speaks, it's in perfectly grammatical but bland Mandarin, the result of training in precision without nuance. "Ms. Mr. Ming. Alba. Robert. Xian." The words come cascading out as though several voices all competed for control of that one mouth.

I see no point in trying to deny it. He's obviously not on some random fishing expedition; he has both knowledge and power. "Yes."

"Ms. Xian. Blanc. Castle. Ming. Ms. Ming Xian."

"Yes," I say again, trying to keep calm. I make a show of adjusting my outermost wrap and draw one of the killers' knives along the way.

"My name is Dante. I believe you've heard of me." He freezes for a moment then continues conversationally. "We'll have that conversation another time. What I need to tell you now is just this: the cure for your blindness is back where you first saw the rest of the world."

"What do you mean, my blindness?" But I already know. Somehow this American (whom I have *not* heard of) knows about my isolation from the yin world. And it's obvious what he means by the place where I first saw the rest of the world, the place that's been in my thoughts so often lately.

"I realize it's a bit cryptic," he says with a tone of obvious amusement, "but you'll understand once you think about it. That's all. All. Think. It." His voice dissolves into that earlier polyphony, and he seems to recede into the distance without actually walking. I recognize the distortions of perspective that come of the magical command of chi flow, but one doesn't usually see so flashy a demonstration.

So. Back to the place where I first saw the rest of the world.

## ROBERT

America feels at once familiar and strange to me, after all that travel. Every place feels strange to me now, of course, in the absence of the constant noise and bustle of the spirits that comprise it. I can just make out the faintest of distant sounds from what would normally be a shouted cacophony, disorderly and vital. My totem remains silent, apart from its appearances on the fringes of some of my

deepest dreams. So it's like looking at the world through heavily tinted glasses and listening to it through earplugs, or worse. My senses feel far more blighted than my twisted legs do.

Even on the purely physical level, though, there's a distinct sense of coming home as I make my way along the edges of O'Hare's concourses. The length of people's strides, the extra space they leave for each other while waiting in lines, the volume of their conversation and the kinds of gestures they make with their hands, all of these show me that I'm among my people once again. I enjoyed many of the people I spoke with abroad, as I generally do, and for all the reports of anti-American sentiment, I found the vast majority of the Scandinavians I met courteous and even friendly to me. It's just that they are not the people I was picked to act as shaman for. They aren't *my* people in that deep-down sense of shared history and destiny.

I take the time to enjoy some of the sights, knowing that my ride can wait just a few extra minutes for me. That dinosaur skeleton never fails to make me smile. I loved dinosaurs as a kid, and continued to do so in adulthood. The actual souls of dinosaurs are usually disappointments, far less interesting than the typical cow or sheep, unaware of having lived in the midst of wonders. The spectacle is still great, though, and part of me always hopes that the fossil skeleton will one day come to life and go browsing among the potted trees. And then there's what a friend calls the "laserium," the gloriously gaudily underground passage with neon tubing and backlit panels around moving sidewalks.

I wish I could hear the neon chatter; it's always got something interesting to say.

Another time, perhaps. I hope.

As I wait for my suitcase, I have a peculiar feeling of being watched. Peculiar for the circumstances now, of course. I am being watched, constantly, in my normal condition, since the spirits can sense those likely to be most receptive to them. Could this be a first sign of my normal aptitude returning to me? I hope so, but I doubt it. This is the sense of an unknown but specific and single thing watching me, without any of the broader nuances of the spirit world. As unobtrusively as I can, I look around for any observers.

I have some sympathy for paranoids at times like this. The world is, after all, genuinely charged with unsuspected significance, and there are unseen powers watching you right now. Separating that out from the sort of specific and possibly dangerous surveillance of an enemy is a tricky task, requiring awareness and prudence simultaneously, and if that were easy, human history would have been very different. I gamble that I will notice the sort of attention I need to, and try to keep the anxiety down deep enough that it won't interfere with my body language.

There he is. A tall, good-looking African American man. He seems vaguely familiar. Another magician of some sort? Did I meet him in person, and if so, within the physical world or somewhere else? I can't recall. He's seen me see him, and he strides over. I notice that he never has to break stride, because everyone in his way gets out of it in

just the nick of time. Nothing flashy, but he's showing me that he can affect the distribution of the world's fortunes in a fairly significant way. I take the lesson to heart.

Without saying anything, we step into an alcove where the airport stores baggage carts. Nobody takes notice of us; people do this all the time, usually to reduce the background volume a bit for a cell phone call. We're just two guys talking. As far as everyone else is concerned, that is.

"Mr. Ms. Mr. Robert. Ming. Lege." That's the first string of words out of his mouth. I can't dignify it with a term like "sentence." It's far too uncoordinated for that. It's also... duplicated, or triplicated. I used to read a lot of science fiction back in my mental hospital days, and I recall stories of alternate universes. Is he speaking to someone who might be here, if I weren't? The focus in his eyes seems to shift back and forth as though he were dividing his attention between me and things behind me. Except that there's nothing behind me except wall.

"Some of that is me, yes," I say, as calmly as I can.

"Robert. Albacastle. Mr. Robert. Blanclege. Ming. Blanclege," he says next, his voices gradually harmonizing into a single word at a time. I wait. "My name is Dante," he says in a voice now fully unified. "I believe you've heard of me."

I have indeed. Techno spirits of many kinds talk to urban shamans about the other humans they deal with. There's a shamanic edge in the technomancy practiced among Virtual Adepts and Sons of Ether

(which are traditions with shallower roots but more focused agendas than Dreamspeakers), and I've dealt with some of them for whom affiliation in this group rather than that is really purely a matter of personal taste. They tell us other stories, just as we tell them stories about people and things that might matter to them. Dante isn't supposed to be one of those near-shamans, but I've heard of him anyway. Some of his fans say he's likely to be the next magician of our time to merge directly with his focus of practice. And that reminds me... "Didn't you get killed a few years ago?"

"We'll have that conversation another time," he says. He pauses, eyes briefly closed. "What I need to tell you now is just this." His eyes open again. "The cure for your blindness is back where you first saw the rest of the world."

I think about this. "That makes a certain amount of sense," I answer, "and I'd already thought about doing it sometime soon. But, if you don't mind my asking, how is it that a hacker knows anything useful about shamanic blindness? Have you got an encoding scheme for spirits?"

"I realize it's a bit cryptic," he says, and laughs. I wonder what the joke is. Then it dawns on me: from "encoding" to "encryption" to "cryptic," it's a typical hacker pun. I groan, and his laughter continues. "But you'll understand once you think about it." His voice becomes disjointed and polyphonic again. "That's all. All. Think. It." He takes a step backward and disappears into the crowd. Literally disappears, that is: I can't find him anywhere, and suspect I wouldn't even if my soul's eyes were fully open.

Just as he told me to, I do think about it, and it begins to make sense. Like most shamans, I deal with the spirits of the present moment, even though I know that there are manifestations of other times. The masters of the Virtual Adepts deal not so much with any individual thing as with the connections between them, and some of them, I understand, treat "this now" and "this as it will be" as things whose connections can be probed just like "this now" and "that now." He might have seen my own future recovery, or have encountered the necessary news as a side effect of whatever it is he's up to. It wouldn't be the first time a practitioner of one art stumbled onto something useful and traded or gave it to another, just because it would be handy.

I take a deep breath, and get out my cell phone. I'll have to change my plans.

Twelve hours after that airport encounter, I step out of a rental car on a now-neglected road in upstate New York. The sign on the dangling gates blocking the road says NEW CHESHIRE ASYLUM FOR THE MENTALLY ILL in lettering all too familiar to me. This is where I spent my last year as an unawakened man, and my first days as a shaman. I'm relieved to see that it remains abandoned, despite (judging from all the construction along the highway) a boom in population and business in the area. It might be luck. It might also be a bit of protection from my totem and guardians, and just to be on the safe side of gratitude I build a little shrine to them beside the center gatepost. It never hurts to thank those who've helped you in the past and will in the fu-

ture even if they aren't doing all that much for you right now. Shamanism is all about recognizing your debts.

*Where you first saw the rest of the world*, the man who might be Dante told me yesterday. I won't forget anytime soon that first moment when the world poured on me, in the death throes of an ancient horror and its unloving brood. I woke screaming to see the nightmare face of the world that sun and moon usually hide, and it took me days of continuous wakefulness to struggle back to something like sanity. That happened here, half a decade ago. Yesterday I called my friends in Chicago, told them I had an assignment in New York, and went directly to arrange a ticket for myself to the nearest airport and to schedule a rental car. There were delays—there are *always* delays at O'Hare, it's just too crowded—but in the end I did get here.

It's quiet now, the moonlight shining through thickening clouds. If I have to stay very long, I can expect to get rained on. I take an umbrella out of the rental car and head on up the driveway on foot, once I establish that the gates are too firmly rusted in place for me to conveniently part them. I hear small animals in the undergrowth, and I see the footprints of drifters and vagrants, but none of them are very fresh. That fits. The last time I was here (four years ago, already!?) I observed it long enough to see the pattern, and I'm relieved that it apparently remains undisturbed.

As always, the true bulk of the asylum isn't apparent until you're almost at the front door. The robber baron who lived here first built two small

artificial hills to augment the existing ones and keep the manor from overshadowing the rest of the estate. Once he died and his heirs moved out and the place was donated to the local mental hospital, the directors thought about bulldozing the hills down before realizing that the tempered view was good for inmates as well as patients. I turn the last corner, moving with more limp than usual thanks to my cumulative fatigue, and see the dark bulk now towering right overhead.

Will I have to enter? I can do it if I need to do, but ever since my awakening I've been slightly afraid of the dark. I always fear that something even worse than that first experience is waiting to jump out at me. The thought of making my way through the empty dark halls, listening to the echoes, hoping to hear nothing... I begin to sweat. Please no.

Fortunately, no it is. There was a fire here not long after my last visit, and they just put tarps on the roof. One of them has blown free just right, so as to let the moonlight shine in, through the window of my old cell, and down here to where I stand. Sometimes the universe is very subtle. And then sometimes, like right now, it's very, very obvious indeed. I stand and wait for whatever might come next.

A screaming comes across the sky. It's familiar. In fact, it's obviously an echo of the death-shriek that woke me in 1999, in the midst of that week of nightmares. It's traveled through the upper air ever since, waiting for the moment to descend and scare the shit out of me all over again. It works, too. If I were just a tiny bit less anxious, I'd break and run

right now. The scream goes on and on, piercing me down to the marrow and back out again.

The world begins to spin around me, as the bonds between it and me are severed by the scream. I alone remain on the great axis; adrift, the world flops back and forth, and all my belongings are flung around just like everything else. One of the trees in the front courtyard, weakened by disease or insects long ago, breaks apart as the stress mounts. I hear ominous creaks in the asylum proper. Something had better change soon.

It does. Even though I know (or at least hope for) what's coming, it's still a shock. I feel like my head's split open. My eyes no longer monopolize vision: my whole head seems to have become a giant eye, seeing in all directions at once. My useless ears' input is drowned out by the flood of sounds registering directly in the depths of my mind. I touch everything I see and hear, and smell it, and taste it. I taste the moon when I look up. I taste the dirt when I look down, the dirt and the grass and the seeds and the bugs that crawl through the grass in search of the seeds and the rock beneath the dirt and the magma beneath the rocks.

I collapse in ecstasy.

Some unknown while later, my senses begin returning to their respective organs, and I open my eyes again. There comes the Rubbish, out of the asylum. And, um, there it comes again. There are two of it, chattering away at each other. They're not copies of each other: one runs more toward industrial waste, one more toward domestic garbage, and their voices sound different. The thing is, the

part of my soul that recognizes its totem recognizes both of them as mine. Something's gone wrong, or at least very different.

## WILLIAM

Orange Beach. My God, I can't believe I'm still in Orange Beach. Forget it, I don't sound nearly as impressive as a young and drunk Martin Sheen.

Damn it all, I'm tired of feeling so *stupid*. I long ago got accustomed to having a mind structurally superior to most other people's, to revisiting the independent bicameral structure that Julian Jaynes says prevailed before the advent of modern consciousness, but without sacrificing modern self-awareness. Ever since that crucial moment of insight, I've lived with a separate lobe of consciousness acting as a source of feedback and instigation, letting me use my brain's capacity much more efficiently and flexibly than conventional single-mode consciousness allows. That got blasted in the telescope accident along with my ability to make cybernetic connections.

It's fucking tiring to have to think through things in a linear matter. Planes and volumes exist for a *reason*, after all, and it's not basic capability that keeps humanity from pursuing multi-dimensional thought, it's just evolutionary accidents that some of us managed to escape. Except here I am, back with the stupids.

I thought about what Dante had said. First thing I did after he left was make some calls to see if anyone had hard information on Dante's current

status. Nope, but there were rumors. Now, there are always alleged sightings of people high on our hit lists (and on our "capture and interrogate, but no disintegrations" lists, and on the others). Some of these sightings are genuine mistakes and some are deliberately planted for various reasons. One of my early jobs for the Project was extending existing sociometric models to allow for better filtering of this kind of anecdotal evidence, and I still recall a lot of the baseline computations. So after my Hong Kong encounter, I gathered up all the information I could without making too-formal requests and let it churn away on the laptop for a while. Eventually my algorithms decided that there was a fairly good chance that Dante was indeed alive and up to something strange, with sighting details pushing a bit out of the expected noise levels.

That took a couple of days, and I kept on the move, shifting down out of luxury hotels to anonymous places near the docks. I gave Kung's credit cards to passing bums on their way to Kowloon and relied on some old-fashioned hacking and forgery to keep me going. I felt reasonably sure I wasn't being watched. And I thought, and thought, and thought.

It's easy to get into one of those loops with no natural exit points when analyzing the motives of your enemies in our kind of war. The Virtual Adepts (Dante was or is one, and I was once one, before I came to my senses) used to be part of the Technocratic Union, so there's a special fratricidal hate going on between them and the groups they forsook. Yes, that same hatred applies from the Adepts'

point of view to those like me who reversed the dimwitted decision to leave the Union. Furthermore, Dante's always had a special hate on for bigots, which I certainly am. So at first look, any effort on his part to do me good must be presumed to be a trap. From there, well it dives into layer after layer of possibility. I'll skip the summary and say that after three days of pondering I decided that I had little to lose by checking out his lead.

So I made my way by boat to Singapore and flew from there, getting a bit more anonymity. As much as a paraplegic white man can, anyway. It took me a week, all told, but eventually I ended up in Mobile, Alabama.

And there I froze for another couple days.

It was perfectly obvious what he meant, once I decided to take his message as having its surface meaning, whatever else it may have. "Back where I first saw the rest of the world" could only be where my consciousness first productively divided. Not in Mobile, but in Orange Beach, Alabama, a perfectly boring fishing town notable only because when I was twelve years old, I looked through the telescope of a doddering old astronomy buff, saw the rings of Saturn for the first time, and shifted something in my brain. Everything I've been and done since then stems from that moment of crisis. What point there could possibly be in going back to that particular place, I couldn't imagine, and though I'd never admit to anyone else, I was profoundly afraid to do so. I know what happened to me the first time. What might happen the second time?

In the end, obviously, I did go. I rented a two-year-old SUV and drove south in the middle of the afternoon, arriving in time to watch the sun set behind the Gulf of Mexico and rows of twisted pine trees planted, probably fruitlessly, as windbreaks. There weren't a lot of people around, not in the middle of the week away from a major holiday, and I had no trouble finding the spot where Dad docked our boat on that significant vacation.

And so here I am, feeling my wheelchair bump-bump-bump over the dock's slats. I thought I might even see a telescope set up again for my edification (or torment, perhaps), but no such luck. Just a couple of derelict drunks fishing off the end of the dock and me. They turn around to look at me, see nothing that matters to them, and turn around again. I wish briefly that they'd both fall in and drown. Once I'm out where the telescope was then, I spin around and around in place, bringing my basic surveillance gear online, looking for anything I should be concerned with. Nothing.

In less time than it takes me to describe this, my consciousness redivides. I feel that detached cognition again. A richer sense of the environment floods in, my perceptions enhanced by parallel analysis and superior recall. When I touch the multi-sense rig in one arm of my wheelchair, I feel the synaptic bonds form just as efficiently as always.

In fact, I feel them *too* efficiently. Thought, sense, commentary flow too fast. My brain has never worked this well. I realize that it's not just me and my separate cognition, it's me and *two* separate cognitive nets. Where the hell did the second one come from? What's going on here?

## MING XIAN

Three weeks after that encounter in Chongqing, I arrive at the place the Westerner spoke of, "where I first saw the rest of the world." It's been twenty-odd nerve-wracking days and nights of hitchhiking, stowing away in cargo trains, once even stealing a motorcycle for an all-night dash along the Grand Canal. Eastern China is too much the domain of my enemies, but it is also the place I first saw most of all. Having found no other cure for my soul's blindness, I took myself into the very heart of China, to Beijing, where I grew up.

Xuanwu district hasn't changed much since I last saw it. Most of the city's Muslims live here, and most of the Chinese make their livelihoods selling either to the Muslims or to the tourists come to the shopping streets. My father and his family did a bit of both, since they dealt with rugs and robes. They made prayer mats woven with select verses from the Koran for the Muslims and lush thick rugs woven with images from classical Chinese art for the tourists. Likewise with the robes. I remember that my brothers and I sometimes took our thrill in dressing up in the robes for the Muslims and acting out mockeries of their prayers and rituals. If our father caught us, we'd suffer, of course, but we didn't realize the significance of our casual prejudice then. I was just one more trouble-making boy then, or at least one more trouble-making soul in a boy's body.

Now, in the female form that the Wu Keng intended as a prison but which proved to be what my soul had craved all along, I do see the harm we did,

and I give thanks to my father for his correction. China has enough men (and women) growing up with our old attitudes never checked, and he was quite right to grieve and to try to correct. It's been years since I saw my brothers, and I have no idea how well his lessons took, but his son-cum-daughter remembers and is glad.

Our old home is where it was, but it and the buildings on each side stand empty. There's a big trench along their side of the street. Looks like plumbing or cabling of some sort being laid, from a distance. I step closer, taking no care to brush against any of the others wandering the streets this morning, and look down to see the roof of some big metal canister. Now I understand. Another legacy of the Great Leap Forward, this must be. We couldn't quite get the "steel mill in every backyard" that rebellious farmers mocked, but we could get a refinery in every district, or at least a waste dump. When the Gang of Four went to their just rewards, their devious underlings destroyed many records of what they'd built and where, and so even now, almost half a century after that tragic time, officials continue to stumble across industrial ruins. Whatever is or was in that tank must have been deemed too toxic for safe residency nearby.

I am just visiting, however, so I decide to take the risk. I wait until noonday prayer draws the Muslims off the streets and lunchtime beckons to my fellow unbelievers. I have the street to myself, just for a few minutes, so I quietly step into the courtyard of our home and slide the door shut behind me. I step to the well in the exact center of

the courtyard and take a deep breath, and peer down.

When I was eleven, I looked down at just this time of day, at just this angle, and saw my first ghost. It was the ghost of a poor old woman who'd been drowned by muggers, not that I knew that at the time. I just remember how the waters parted to let her pale wet face stare up at mine and her lips form the silent words "Draw me up." I didn't, not then, but a year later I did draw up her bones, take her skull with me to see the prison grave into which her assailants had been thrown after one unsuccessful robbery too many, and lay her troubled spirit to rest. That was how the yin world opened itself to me.

So I look down again.

And the waters part, and rising out of them is that female form that I recognize as the perfection of my female ancestors' lineages. This is the consummate mother, sister, and daughter of my line, who finds some distinctive expression in each of us. She came into me after the Wu Keng worked their magic, confirming the reality of the exterior change and enlightening me into the mysteries of the distaff side. It is she who left me when that dreadful eye blinked at me. She comes to me with a smile.

But she does not come alone. The waters part again, and here comes the smiling man who is the perfection of father, brother, and son. He must know that he has nothing to do with me! I am not his! But he and the woman join hands, and they glide in through my ears, throat, and nose together. I feel

both sides of the family stir within me. The female affinity with yin restores my vision of the yin world, and I rejoice at the familiar sights. The male affinity with yang stirs just as strongly, though, and I am troubled by the flood of unfamiliar sights. I know what many of these things are from my studies, as the attentive scholar must comprehend yin and yang together. It's just that there's so much difference between study and experience. I struggle to find my own soul self in the midst of all this.

If the woman's lineage within me has been the third eye, then now I have... a fourth?

## DANTE

From their point of view, the trine undergo the restoration of their vision at separate times and places. To me, looking at their combined form, it's all the same. This is the next discrete moment in their shared experience. I know, looking slightly ahead at their path, that I must send them a message.

I feel around me the buzz of the ancient souls who call themselves, or allow others to call them, the Rogue Council. They often speak cryptically, and this is no exception. I can reach their meaning directly, drawing it out of the network of allusions and inferences, but I wonder whether the trine will understand. The avatars of the council tell me that they've chosen these three, or allowed these three to choose themselves, or something of the sort, because each of them has the capacity to carry a second avatar within themselves. This is the stuff of mad-scientist experimentation among most ma-

gicians, since souls and essences seldom take kindly to manipulation. Most efforts to force more souls into one body end in the destruction of at least one of those being forced. Usually all. I've seen the mindless husk that can result.

The trine, though, has something the counselor avatars recognize but do not readily explain. They describe it to me banally as extra capacity, and then wander off into extended competitive metaphysics. I'm left with the duty of drawing the trine on to the next step.

So I formulate just the sort of cryptic message I always hated getting when I was in the midst of significant sequences. I don't imagine any of the trine will like it, either, but then they don't have to. Indeed, being driven forward out of pique is as satisfactory a way to go as any, for this purpose. I play with their dreams, pulling together a composite of their re-awakenings, and adding in the sphinx image the counselors like so much. In the midst of it, I have drifting lights form themselves into pulsing rings around the words *It takes two eyes to see most fully*.

That should keep them busy for a while.



## PART TWO: DISTILLATION (EXTRACTION OF VOLATILE ELEMENTS)

*It is a fragile path we awakened walk [...]. The voices of those who went before us can guide our steps along that path, if we care to listen. The First Cabal persevered, even unto death, and their courage should inspire us all.*

—The Fragile Path: Testaments of the First Cabal, “A Brief Introduction”



## ROBERT

So here I am, with two totems talking to me. Or perhaps two manifestations of a single entity in different relationships to time as I know it, since it's not like the Rubbish exists quite in my flow even when there's just one of it, and the spirit world is full of creatures who experience reality wildly differently from the way I do. Like, just for instance, those time-reversed spirits I encountered in New York just before the big red eye blew my totem away for several weeks.

Now, when a man is accompanied by not one but two spirits who manifest only to his eyes and choose to appear as animated mounds of garbage, and they're identical to each other but apparently unable to perceive each other, and they both insist on offering classic totemic advice, there's only one thing a man can do. He needs to name them Dr. Seuss-style. That's just what I did, labeling the one that favored my eastern side Rubbish One and the other Rubbish Two. Neither of them seemed to notice that, either; it wasn't just that they couldn't sense each other, but also that they couldn't sense anyone else interacting with the other. There are times when the shamanic life goes through high weirdness and comes out the other side to simple exhaustion.

This is how it's gone, day after day:

"So about those spirits in New York," I say.

The two Rubbishes answer simultaneously in identical voices. "They flee from the not-yet."  
"They are spirits in New York but not of the city."

If I'm lucky, I distinguish the two sentences spoken in precisely the same gravelly not-really-a-voice. If not, I hear something like, "They they are flee spirits from the in not New York yet but not of the city."

I decide to ask one of the totems a question. "Not of the city. Do you mean just not part of the city's present, or from some *place* other than there as well as some other *time*?" This kind of question is always tricky, because the Rubbish doesn't seem to really understand what a human means by time, but we can often work out at least some partial communication.

As Rubbish Two starts its answer, Rubbish One responds with... well, you know how comic strips sometimes show a person not quite saying anything by a word balloon that just has an ellipsis in it? "...," that is. Rubbish One answers in a way that isn't composed of sound, but of chunks of absent meaning, making it hard to think very much in the same way that loud noise makes it hard to hear. Rubbish Two says in its most labored expository style, "City in this time is only really this city. The city in any other time is not same self. But spirits come from beyond the not-same city. Not just other face of self but other place."

"Do you know where?" I ask.

Rubbish One continues with its non-answers, which flow (I think) from its inability to reconcile my actions, which it sees as clearly as any totem does, with the totems' isolation from one another. The non-answers fill out the whole confusing situation with a smoother, more readily dismissible

silence. Rubbish Two shifts its vocalization to a stack of used photocopy paper, so it whistles a bit at the end of each phrase. "From city that might be."

That doesn't help much. Shamans and others who travel outside the walls of the world know that a great many things which never achieve physical being nonetheless exist in the infinite realms of thought and possibility. But mostly they stay in their own places. There are walls around those equivalents of worlds, the homes of dreams, speculations, archetypes, totems, everything that comes before form and is required for substance to take on form or meaning. And the spaces in between are not conducive to many travelers' well-being, any more than trying to swim in deep ocean is good for most land-dwelling creatures. The things native to the wilds between bordered places, in turn, don't thrive much, if at all, inside world walls. If they survive at all, they have a depressing tendency to turn mad, becoming the horrors that dwell in nightmares and folklore.

Obviously we spirit travelers manage the journeys, as do some other entities. More likely, though, anything loose in my world from any place sensibly described as "city that might be" was carried by someone or something, wrapped in a little bubble of stable existence to go safely through the chaos. But trying to get details on that from the Rubbish (either one) won't be easy. Just how do you go about trying to pin down the nature of a spirit's cosmos of origin and its means of travel into material exist-

ence without being able to use *tenses*, for crying out loud? I need a different source of answers.

Naturally, none of the entities likely to be able to provide me with that sort of answer lives anywhere around this old hospital. Time to hit the road again.

## WILLIAM

My thoughts continue to flow at this abnormal pace. I continue to wonder why.

First I have to provide a suitable cover for my period of impairment. One of the good things about working with organizations full of obsessive risk-takers well beyond the generally accepted limits of technology and physiology is that there are great archives of very strange physical and psychological failure modes. The conviction that intellectual progress requires both trepanning and castration? Eighty-two cases of it, the first in 1891 when the Union was still young, the most recent a few months ago. The inability to distinguish any even number from any other? Two hundred and six cases of it, generally among military programmers immediately after a war. (Interesting unpublished dissertations about it, too.) The paranoid suspicion of hive intelligence among one or more species of vermin? Scarcely a month goes by without it. (Oddly enough, it's become less common since the invention of real hive intelligences.) Into this ocean of fuckups I cast my nets and draw forth a story I like and can establish as part of a known pattern.

I have to sell it to my bosses, of course, but they are desperate to believe it. They need me. The hematovores are up to something strange: most of them are weakening, rapidly, but some are picking up unusual strength and particular aptitudes none of us have seen before. The similarities between some of the tricks shown by recently deceased and revived individuals and some of the very old stories in our anthropological archives suggest that ancient forms of the elusive "vampire virus" are reemerging. That in itself is troublesome, both because there are usually messy side effects from that sort of genetic reversion, and because (in the immediate) it means a fresh wave of stronger "vampires" to deal with. Much as I might like to go out into the field with shooting teams myself, I know that being smarter than usual doesn't itself make me any less paraplegic than usual. I have to get my jollies in other ways.

Patterns. That's what I do. I work to identify previously unsuspected patterns and understand their significance. Most of the time, of course, they aren't significant at all, because when enough things happen, some of them cluster in ways that look meaningful to the human mind but are just plain random. Of course, humans and other intelligent beings trying to hide themselves from the Union's notice, endeavor to make their patterns of behavior *look* random. Distinguishing the real patterns from the illusory is harder than you might think, the mind being wired to treat sequence as desirable, but it is possible, and the race between hider and seeker is very much like the endless competition between code makers and code breakers. So

we shovel a million kinds of data into the computers and parse it a thousand different ways, and look for something useful.

Take this one: For a long time there was a network of well-entrenched upper-class child molesters in upstate New York. Like a lot of upper-class would-be villains, they dabbled in the occult. We try to discourage that when it's done by people who hold positions of influence, and some of these folks did. Money supply management is bad enough when people are being rational. A little voodoo bullshit behind the scenes only reinforces the popular belief that economics can't be rational, and sets our plans for a sensible world back that much more. Just as we were about to take more thorough action, the leaders of the cabal all died violently within a few weeks of each other, in deaths with a lot of occult trappings. Something for us to be concerned about? No, it turns out, just victims and relatives of victims sharing the same regional superstitions and acting accordingly. I handed the rest off to a media management team, who made the perpetrators look both deserving and foolish.

Other patterns are emerging all the time. Unusual quantities of shipping lost in the Mediterranean? That's piracy, using higher than usual technology, possibly including someone's old military hardware sold illicitly. The visible authorities won't get that one; I assign a field team to investigate.

A marked rise in—I blink for a moment at this one—adherents of Native American shamanism whose devotees claim a bond with the Great Turtle

Spirit. That's odd and, on the evidence of past pan-tribal activism, potentially dangerous. We'll use the US government to poke on them from one side and try some culture jamming from the other.

Tribalistic ritual violence in the Balkans, going on mostly *just* beyond the boundaries of UN-patrolled core territories: worth investigating. The last thing we need is another damn bunch of Dracula wannabes out to build their own secret kingdom. And so forth and so on.

Day after day after day goes by like this. I find enough of a concentration of weirdness in the Balkans that I decide I should go investigate there in person. Time to book some flights.

## TING XIAN

I wake after a night of troubled dreams, filled with the war between yin and yang, to the sound of someone outside the empty warehouse I chose to rest in. When I look at my watch, I realize that it's Wednesday, time for the People's Armed Police to post the weekly list of people wanted for questioning. I'll look at it once I'm up.

I'm accustomed to sleeping with very minimal comfort while in the field. This isn't like that. Buildings are made for furniture, with deliberate lack of concession to comfort in the frames and foundations. I found some burlap bags that weren't too disgusting and made a support for my head and a lining over the floor for the rest of my body, and I found an out-of-the-way niche to do it in. Sometime around midnight, a trio of local drifters

staggered in and spent the night in long and often tearful conversation, just inside the front door. It was drunkards' conversation, full of drifting allusions to bosses who'd done them wrong, women who'd done them wrong, friends who weren't around anymore, and the endless minutiae of whatever brew it was they were drinking. A floor above and well out of sight, I kept quiet and wasn't disturbed, but I didn't rest much.

The trio drifted out right around sunrise. To work? I sincerely hope not, but I have a terrible suspicion that it's so. It's not like these would be the first exhausted drunkards laboring in the service of some people's enterprise. My father's shop had them, and I remember the beatings that his union officers used to administer every Saturday night when they didn't want to bring the grievance resolution committee into it. In any event, all around me I can hear the neighborhood (and the city beyond) stirring to morning life.

I sit for a while on the floor, out of line of sight with the street, studying the rooftops of the next block over and the cluster of relay towers just past them. I'm accustomed to seeing things in terms of their quiet, darkness, and dissolution. The yin realm receives all substance into itself as form fails, and the shape of a thing's grave is implicit in its first breaths and steps. Ever since my first awakening into the workings of magic, I've seen the latter part of each thing's Way—not its beginnings or its growth, which remain mysteries to me, but its weakness and passing. Now I see the rest, and it's tremendously confusing to me. The Way makes

sense, when you understand it, but I haven't been granted wisdom along with this sight.

After I first became a girl, I'd sometimes hear voices from the yin realms whispering in suitable places: in the branches of dead trees, in dark corridors, just before sleep. They explained things to me, over the years. There's nothing comparable with this new awareness of the yang realms. I hear *sounds*, very loud ones sometimes, but no *voices*, no narrative or definition. I am neither accustomed to hearing roofs shout to each other as the sun first strikes them, nor to the peculiarly musical cacophony of engines burning fossil fuels and releasing scraps of nearly pure yang back into the world at large. It's not unnatural in the way that a great sin is; it's just new and strange and hard to deal with. I cannot yet speak in terms that yang spirits understand, though they can sense at least some of my emotions.

In the midst of all this, the police go by below, nailing up their signs. I manage to close my inner ears and eyes to at least most of the yang torrent, so that I can walk in the mundane world without too much difficulty. Downstairs, I gather my coat around me and step out to see whom the PAP wants now.

Me.

Right after an entry for two murderers, there's one with my name and picture. I'm described as a terrorist and dealer in controlled weaponry, associated with the rather brutal independence extremists in the western provinces. They have a picture of me at a conference last year, standing alongside two of

those would-be rulers of a free Uygur state, all of us smiling a little. I remember the occasion, but not the photographer. How often does it ever matter?

The Wu Keng can move quickly when they must. I presume that one of their spiritual spies detected some disturbance associated with my reawakening and managed to get to contacts in the police while the drunkards interfered with my sleep. It wouldn't be that hard—the declaration is fairly typical, there being no shortage of violent separatists and the crime itself being one that doesn't require anything like extensive justification or explanation. Any typical resident of Beijing who sees the notice and sees me will quite sensibly go to the police, not wanting to run even a small risk of being blown up by someone making a point about homelands. And the penalties for collaboration with accused terrorists are so harsh that the pool of underworld experts who will now be willing to cooperate with me is much smaller than it would have been otherwise.

I already knew I wanted to return to the place where I meet with my ancestors. Now I also want to get as far west as I can as fast as I can, away from the power of the Wu Keng, away from the power of the vast government with its own agendas. This may be hard.

## ROBERT

Few things are as unpleasant to deal with as a general sense of fate. The millennium of the Christian calendar is well past us, and I don't hear a lot

of *talk* about impending doom or anything like that. But I notice extra weariness at work. There's a sharpening of underlying tensions, but no obvious targets or triggers.

Not long after my rather forcible awakening, I went on a trip to Brazil and Ecuador, following dream messages sent by an older shaman who'd been chosen to be my mentor. In turn, he introduced me to some others, recognizing that his own obsession with fighting the Technocratic Union in a one-man guerilla war made him at least biased, though not altogether unreliable. I remember an old woman in the jungles south of Macondo, Colombia. She wouldn't discuss anything touching on women's secrets, and I already knew enough not to push whenever she went silent. We still had plenty to talk about, including monsters and immigrants.

She wanted me to think about how it would feel to lead the life chosen for me. Shamanic life isolates you from the rest of your community, even as duty ties you back to it in new ways. On the individual level, she said, I'd be going through what immigrants do as families and communities when they arrive in another land. Most of the time, the local authorities take little interest in their well-being—assuming such officials aren't actively malevolent predators in their own right. The newcomers must band together to provide their own justice and peace, such as may be. This is where militias, gangs and political machines all come from. The newcomers create, if they can, a society of their own within the society at large.

If the members of the community succeed in the right ways, they and their descendants become assimilated into their surroundings. The walls of the ghetto weaken thanks to a flow of ideas and personal bonds both in and out. Children take to living in their own ways, and the ghetto changes from a tool of survival to a simple instrument of cultural pride. That's if it can work, of course; in much of the world, some peoples must continue to live in their ghettos, generation after generation, without any hope of improvement until something changes within the resisting dominant culture.

Europeans and Americans don't like to think of themselves as subject to anything of the sort. We're the people that others assimilate to, or so we tell ourselves. But we are also outsiders and victims, the hapless pawns of what this Columbian shaman called the "night society," all the monsters and inhuman forces who prey upon us. Our inward-turning paranoia, our reluctance to leave the neighborhoods we grew up in except for very specific tasks elsewhere, our problems with gangs, these are all ways we deal with a threat we do not properly know and can't even name. What the white North is to the rest of the world, the night society is to us, and more so because it flourishes outside any sort of public, conscious scrutiny.

I remember her comments now because I think something's stirring the American spirit again. The night society is up to something of its own, and agitating their unwitting mortal subjects in the process. As I drive from New York down to West Virginia, I sense these not-quite-human agitations

everywhere, and the ripples from those disturbances make life unpleasant for human souls and the spirits that dwell alongside them. I smell fear in the houses, dread in the streets, doubt along the highways, more so than ever before. Nowhere is it as intense as it was in New York in September, 2001, but unlike then, it's ubiquitous: every single town and village seems to have something of its own to dread. It's not the same sort of thing everywhere, either. Here it's vampires playing their long games of undead politics. There it's ghosts fleeing some disturbance as urgently as my future-fearing spirits flee theirs. Always changing, but always the same dread.

This puts my immediate problem in a different light. "The city that might be" that the Rubbish speaks of could be the city if it's more thoroughly under the night society's rule. Or less so, I guess. But this doesn't feel like an impending liberation: spirits at last free to be themselves without fear of supernatural slavery wouldn't be running like that unless they were all quisling allies of the night society, and they weren't. There's more dread and less joy coming up.

As I drive, the Rubbishes manifest every few minutes somewhere near the road. I don't think any of my fellow drivers notice mounds of trash waving cheerfully in our direction. I hope not, at least. They have enough things to deal with already.

## WILLIAMS

Flying on commercial airlines when you're paraplegic is a hassle at the best of times, and of course I don't fly at the best of times. You have to book a top-of-the-line first class seat, and then usually make additional arrangements, if you rely on anything at all outside the narrow range of mobility aids stewardesses get trained to work with. When they recruited me for Project Ragnarok, one of the promises they made was that I wouldn't have to put up with that, because if I had to go somewhere beyond driving range, I'd go custom.

Naturally, that was another lie. Custom flights work out just under half the time. That puts me ahead of most of my colleagues, who count themselves lucky to get one custom flight in five, but it's still a fucking nuisance at a time and in circumstances that absolutely do not need any more nuisances at all.

I spend two and a half hours cooling my heels in Atlanta before deciding to take matters into my own hands. After all, they hired me because I'm a good hacker.... Twenty minutes and thirty seconds later, the last three telemarketing firms to try bothering my home number (all duly logged and misdirected until they gave up, thanks to the ELIZA-based counter-interrogative system) are each poorer by six figures. The money cascades through a whole slew of temporary accounts and ends up not in any of my personal accounts but in one of the disposable credit cards they give us for field ops like this. With that I can (and do) book a charter through Brussels to Tuzla, Bosnia, and hire

a pilot, a local kid I've worked with before. He thinks I'm a drug runner, and I let him keep on thinking that, since a comfortably familiar secret is much better than anything unusual.

Doc Halloway notices it, or rather one of our security systems does and alerts him. We have a frank exchange of views, ending in my expressed wish that he give his life in the cause of fulfilling the sodomite impulses of cougars and bears and his wish in return that my fingers join my legs in uselessness. The crucial thing is that he lets me do it. I don't comment on that and he doesn't either. As long as I get results, I can get away with things like this. One day, I suppose, I'll fall short, and then it'll be all up, but not yet. Not yet.

Now this is the way to travel, I think for a moment. It would be nice in some ways not to have to do it with quite that kind of funding, but then that's the occupational hazard of working for a group that doesn't officially exist. The Technocratic Union is scarcely even anyone's boogieman. The handful of unfortunately insightful observers who notice us or figure us out analytically are pretty much all by nature also inclined toward errors of judgment in the direction of overall wackiness, and the truth gets lost in assertions about the Bilderbergers, what really happened to John Lennon, how many frames are missing from the Zapruder Film, and when the Commonwealth Bank of Australia began devoting some of its basement to organ farms. So that's okay, but it's only part of the problem.

In the past we've sometimes operated as bogus offices of real agencies, public and private, but it doesn't quite work. Any agency large enough to hide us is large enough to have at least one damnably control-resistant nimrod who will stumble onto the irregularities and feel compelled to do something about it. You can find the traces of our wreckage in the history books, if you know how to read between the lines of major scandals. We always ended up having to set up some patsies with boring but exploitable secrets so that we could make our getaway while they held the media spotlight. (And anyone who thinks there wasn't a media spotlight in the 1890s or 1920s really doesn't know that much.) Even when the cover works, there's administrative overhead, and there are temptations there, too. We can get distracted from our mission just like everyone else, and when we do, it's not just the Union that suffers, it's the world.

These are the thoughts that race across the upper reaches of my conscious perception as we fly. I find myself seeing the organizational flaws (and strengths, where there are any) much more clearly than ever before. It's not just a metaphorical application of the kind of network analysis I do in debugging distributed software, but a much closer identity. We always speak of the machine in the self, the world machine, and so on, but we don't usually mean anything as vivid and interesting as I understand now. I get out my laptop and start sketching designs based on the multilevel inheritance structures I understand now, and briefly think

that there's something genuinely revolutionary in here.

Alas, the moment fades somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. I become tired, and the patterns of thought become disorganized again. I lapse from the heights back down to something more ordinary. Ordinary for me, admittedly, which is still extraordinary for the masses, who'll never reach even that far without genetic re-engineering and/or significant computational enhancement of neurology, but after where I've just been it's a long way down. I break my growing depression with a little self-critical humor. "I can feel it, Dave. My mind is going. There's no question." Meanwhile, the mission is still waiting.

One of the most important steps the Union ever made in the advancement of science came in the 1880s, when a small group of biologists based in Paris demonstrated that "vampirism" conforms to the standard principles of epidemiology. Before then, my predecessors had certainly felt sure that this was the case because, well, it's a scientific world, but they hadn't *known*. The symptoms of the disease are so varied and so downright strange, involving commensurate relations between an essentially dead human host and a very unusual animating parasite, that it took many researchers over many decades simply to establish that that there are blood-chemistry markers all vampires carry and no one else does (unless they've somehow ingested blood from the infected). The transmission vectors are tricky, too, involving what amounts to a near-death experience *most* of the time

but with a secondary mode that lets the parasite interact more weakly with the host without the full-blown range of symptoms.

The next formal breakthrough (as opposed to the accumulation of specific data and minor insights, which are both important but not the same thing as real paradigm development) didn't happen until after World War II. That was a bad time for the Union, to put it mildly. Either a majority or a strong plurality of the most senior leadership had committed itself to the Axis powers. Damn fools. They were seduced by the appeal of fascism, and resolutely ignored that already-existing body of theoretical study by people like von Mises and Hayek as well as the practical experience of Prussia and other nations showing that strong central control simply doesn't work. Period. The knowledge necessary for a flourishing system of self-directed agents, whether they're people or software or something else, is diffused all through the system, and there is simply no privileged vantage point that allows any one agent to know what all the others do.

(Well, there are ways around that, involving qualitative improvements to the agents' perceptive and cognitive functions. Why do you think I'm so obsessed with augmenting humanity, anyway? I want us to get out of this fucking rat race. Until we do, we're stuck with these problems.)

Once it became clear that a fascist victory was not going to happen, the Union went through the next best thing to an actual shooting civil war. The strategic assets were, of course, information stores. Just as German, Italian, and Japanese medical

records went up for grabs, so did Technocratic archives. I've always thought that it would be fun, in a draining sort of way, to assemble a multidimensional map showing the movement of selected data, physically and in terms of control, year by year. But I digress. What matters for my work now is that in 1951, the Telman Cay Epidemiology Working Group got their hands on enough data from all sides to assemble a reliable map of sub-strains of the vampirism virus. Up until then, factional rivalry had kept crucial data out of reach, but while the show trials and purges were going on, the Telman Cay crew cleaned up.

They got purged themselves, of course, in the panic of 1963 and '64. You can't do that kind of thing and not make any enemies. But before they went down and out, they spread copies of their work around. As a strategy for deflecting the impending arrests, it failed, but as a knowledge-preservation strategy it worked superbly. Here it is for me to use now.

The upshot of the current data and my new analysis is that things are getting weird in a new away among the various strains of vampirism. Now, in one (meaningful) sense, it's always strange. Anything that makes stories of vampires seem plausible and well founded is just strange. But things are going on that lack any precedent I can discern. Most particularly, it looks like one whole strain, the one we call East Europe One since that's where it seems most common, has just disappeared. No bodies, no nothing, just gone. I have the reports from the

Hematovore Developments Threat Team here, with their guesses ranked in order of probability:

Possibility #1: The victims of some other strain discovered exploitable weaknesses in the victims of HHV strain EU1 and mounted a coordinated attack. The hematovores spend a lot of time chowing on each other, apparently finding already-infected blood particularly yummy, and the virus doesn't impair intelligence. Quite the opposite, in fact, in some cases.

Possibility #2: Non-hematovores discovered an exploitable etc. etc. There's an attached breakdown of probable candidates, including uncoordinated factions of the Union itself, a resurgent covert Inquisition, and so on down to an alien species once mistakenly reported as related to the transmission of EU1. The annotations run to many, many pages; I let them wait.

Possibility #3: HHV-EU1 mutated and wiped out its victims. Unlikely, given the need for both the latent defect and a global trigger, but better than the alternatives.

Possibility #4: Other, with a very long (and very conjectural) list of scenarios. I recognize some of the pet issues here, like Dana Caruthers and her crusade to establish deadly orgone radiation as responsible for HHV and many other woes, and my occasional drinking buddy Rob the Bogman and his thing about Jungian archetypes and morphogenetic resonance instantiating concepts in tissue rendered temporarily undifferentiated. Rob may know every good bar and most good brothels in

eight time zones, but on this one he's just plain as full of shit as my first wife was during the divorce. I skim in search of anything new or interesting, sigh, and go back to the analysis of the higher-probably risks.

Turns out to be a good thing it's a long flight.

## MING XIAN

Two days west of Beijing, I walk along a side road toward Mentougou. It's heavily trafficked, of course. There simply are no empty spaces around the capital, but there are districts whose people continue to farm and tend their herds and mostly stay out of the way of large-scale commerce. Among them I can seem to be simply one more peasant woman, or perhaps someone originally from the bureaucratic classes but sentenced to labor for her crimes against the state and who chose to remain at it when the sentence expired. These are familiar, comfortable roles, not needing any further explanation, and not inviting scrutiny to see if I might be a notorious terrorist.

It's lush here even in midsummer. These lands have been irrigated since long before there actually was a China as such (at least, they're irrigated whenever there's no war or rebellion in the area), and the good soil holds the water very well. The roadside grass grows at least knee high, and in some places almost up to my shoulders, while the pines planted as windbreaks sway gracefully in the occasional breezes. Farmers pass me by in their carts and trucks; I notice that while the tires are often mismatched, they're all in fairly good condition, unlike

many of the ones I see on Uygur roads. And the people look like me, the same builds and proportions in their features as I see in my own. Sometimes it's good to be one of a billion.

Not long after sunset, an empty truck driven by a cheerful-looking old man slows down so that he can speak to me without getting out. I've been watching the people passing by me with this new awareness of yang power, learning to judge the health of body and soul in terms of its strengths as well as its yin-revealed weakness. This one... doesn't have any health. He has a karmic burden, dark heavy chains tying him to the yin realms, but the only spark of life in him is in his blood and breath, and they belong to someone else. He is one of the hungry ghosts who claw their way out of hell and back into the world to resolve the debts that chain them.

When he speaks, it is formally, in an old-fashioned dialect. That's no surprise to me, since the hungry ghosts can last for centuries if they're as careful as this one seems to be. "Good evening, miss." He uses a term implying individual distinction without noble rank. "Pleasant as these roads may be, they are not altogether safe at night. There are predators." He does not smile—to judge from the smoothness of his cheeks, he has not smiled or frowned for a long time—but his manner is friendly enough.

And of course I know what he's not saying, and he knows that I know. "Good evening, sir," I say, framing my address to a gentleman of unknown status. "I welcome your concern, though I've been well

trained to attend to my safety." I wait for him to respond, walking on in silence a little while.

"Please, miss," he says after giving me another considered look. "We must speak."

"Must we?" I answer somewhat glibly, taking longer than I should to understand his emotions. He is fighting through a passionate internal conflict on more than one level of awareness, and I should avoid provoking him.

He pulls to the side of the road a few paces in front of me and parks the truck. When he gets out, I see that he's no taller than I am, but he looms more impressively thanks to perfectly erect posture and that general air of authority. His suit is neatly tailored and would fit in with any Western-influenced gathering of officials in the last century and a half. His hands are as smooth as his face, the nails neatly trimmed except for his right index finger. That one's ragged and dirty, and I can't quite imagine the sort of circumstance that must have produced it. After standing still with the precision and consistency possible only for one not distracted by the process of life, he says, "Yes, miss, we must."

I come to a stop four paces behind his truck's rear bumper. "I see, sir. Please enlighten me, then."

He takes one step closer to me, and the shadows deepen around us. The flow of yang dims as well, leaving a little pocket of land closer to death than usual. "Miss, you carry something strange inside you," he says through the magical gloom. "The part of your soul that lies closest to heaven, it is much stronger and brighter than it ought to be. It echoes, for those able to hear. You are a mystery,

and mysteries must be solved and resolved lest they threaten the harmony of things."

I very much want to back up, but there's no point in doing that until I decide to actually flee. Most hungry ghosts can outrun a living woman. I clasp my hands behind my back and trace out the boundaries of a mandala through which I can escape if I need to. He'll sense that there is magic brewing behind me, of course, but will not (I hope) be able to tell what it is until just before I complete it. "Sir, I am also of the Way. How could I be anything else? Heaven appoints our souls and its ministers infuse them. Your complaint is not with me, but with the Scarlet Empress and the Ebon Dragon."

"Do not play rhetorical tricks with me, miss." His flat tone is scary enough that I'm now glad for his absence of expressions. "This is not Heaven and your nature. You used to be one lightning person among many others. Something happened to you not at birth but mere days ago. I want to know what it was, so that I may know what to do about you."

Beneath my feet, the darkened ground trembles. Something's passing through the yin realms quite close to the skin of the world, moving so quietly that I'd have missed it if it weren't for my fear-born alertness. It's circling around us, drawing in and out. The hungry ghost was quite right about the nighttime dangers, apparently. "Sir, I do not see that you possess the mantle of righteous judgment in this matter. Heaven raises up its agents and blesses them with wisdom and presence. You have not been blessed even with your own breath,

and if your blood is not your own, I fail to see how your insight can be any more trustworthy."

"You will not cooperate, then?"

"I will not, unless I see some sign that this is the will of Heaven for me."

With a small snort, he steps toward me, his arms rising from his sides and his fists beginning to clench. I hasten the work on my mandala.

Just then, the darkness he's called forth coalesces into a second human form. Well, something like a human form: eight feet tall and so purely black that I can make out details only in silhouette, wearing classical Chinese armor and lifting a massive sword in each of its four arms. It stands directly behind the hungry ghost confronting me, so he cannot see it. But of course he can see the shock in my expression and feel the chill, and he whirls around as the first of the swords swings down toward him. He mutters a name I can't quite make out and ducks to avoid the blow.

I decide not to stop and watch. The moment the mandala is complete and the hungry ghost is busy with his rival, I plunge out of the world, through the mirrorlands, and into the deeper yin realms. Hungry ghosts can pursue me here, but it takes them some time, and they are at risk of recapture by the demons from whom they escaped in the first place. As for the other, it might be one of those demons come for its prey, in which case (if it wins) they'll both be headed quite directly back to one of the thousand hells. It might be another hungry ghost, since they have a demonic side that sometimes manifests in shadow-warrior forms like

that; if so, the winner will probably come after me, but the fight might take a while. (Stories tell of how the unbreathing can fight for days, weeks, months on end.)

Or it might be something unknown, in which case I'm in precisely the situation I was before the truck pulled up, facing unsuspected opposition. My transformed soul echoes, the hungry ghost said. Then I can expect more seekers, some perhaps even less benevolent. I need my ancestors, and it might be as easy (which is to say, no more insanely difficult) to travel there through the lands of the dead.

## ROBERT

I gave Marilyn a call when I crossed the state line, so by the time I get to Point Pleasant, she's all ready for me. There's fresh incense all around the gateway to her farm, and the wind chimes that so many of the local spirits seem to enjoy, and the faint echoes of chants for repose. She's also swept the walk and set out a basket of the Grimes golden apples she knows I love. It's welcoming for both me and my totem. Totems. Whatever.

Back when I was still in my initial wandering, the Rubbish pointed me here. Marilyn Gosberger was the first shaman I met who struck me as anything like really sane. She's middle-aged, widowed, and runs her farm with these great orchards and a few horses in bloodlines that make for good tourist riding. She's also been talking with the spirits since she was in her teens. When I first commented on how much she lacked our kind's usual twitchiness, she just laughed and said, "Bob, I *did* crazy. But that

was a long time ago, and after you're done with crazy there's still all this life to lead." That was an important milestone in my own recovery.

We've stayed in touch ever since, though years go by between our actual visits. Sometimes we exchange phone calls, sometimes letters, sometimes a little dream-shaping. There aren't many shamans I'd care to let near my dreams, but she's demonstrated again and again that she does no harm and doesn't pry where there isn't a need—and that she can tell the difference between need, want, and simple nosiness. Sometimes she helps me with a problem, drawing on her experience with spirits very unlike the troubled urban ones I spend most of my time with. Occasionally I get to help her, particularly when there's a problem with the highway or the power lines or something else that taps into the urban ecology. She's one of the few people in this world that I think of as really being a friend.

She comes out just as I turn off the car's engine. I know that she doesn't like small motors, having had bad encounters with engine and oil spirits back in her crazy time, so I always park well away from the house. And I don't actually acknowledge her until I've made three passes around the car, erecting simple wards. (They'll help with the oil leak that started yesterday, too. Whoever said shamans were unworldly didn't know what he was talking about.) Then I brush the dust and spices from my hands to close the wards, and turn to greet her properly. She's got her still-black hair pulled up in a tight little bun and is wearing a blue and white gingham dress; I'd think she was being ironic about

the farmwife stereotype if I didn't know that it's just the way she's most comfortable.

"Good to see you, Bob," she says while giving me a big bear hug. "And you too," she adds with a nod to both versions of the Rubbish. The dumpster she usually keeps around the side of her house is now out front—pulled by a couple of her horses, I'm guessing—and the Rubbishes have a great pile of fun things to manifest in. They both bow back and arrange pieces into big smiles.

"Thanks," I say. "It's been a weird time..."

She cuts me off there with a laugh. "As opposed to all that boring typical time you usually have. Though I do see you carrying around more totems than a man might really need."

"True enough," I say and explain as we take seats on her porch chairs. It's a long story, but she keeps it all straight.

"Reversed speech?" She says at last.

"Reversed movements, too, I think. The whole spirit's flip-flopped timewise."

That makes her snort again, "timewise" does. She thinks it's a bad idea to borrow too much jargon from scientific usage, which is precisely where I got it. I was a physics and astronomy buff before my hospitalization and awakening. She says that the terminology all carries assumptions about how the world works that could someday get me in trouble. She also knows that I'm not going to stop all of it, so she merely makes the occasional expression of derision, a little maternal nagging about the equivalent of putting my elbows on the table.

Finally I'm done, and she sips her lemonade and thinks about it all for a while.

"You want to talk to them," she guesses, "and you came to me for help with the reversals."

"Right as ever, Marilyn."

"Gotcha." She leans forward, and makes a few finger tracings in the condensation on the side of your glass. "You didn't do so well with it last time out, did you?"

"Not so as you'd notice." Not unless you count unleashed demons and four weeks of dysentery for the folks I was trying to protect with a reversing ward gone terribly wrong as "so well," at least.

"Right." She nods firmly, as if to show me that that's settled. "Okay, if it's a full time reversal, then it's probably not goetic, and that makes your life easier. Last thing you need to deal with is someone trying to unsay the name of God or undo the first sentence of creation." It's as odd as ever to hear her soft accent wrapped around technical terms of magic, and I smile as she continues. "When you first said something about this on the phone, I had a feeling that that was what you had. It's the sort of damn fool thing you'd expect to find some New York spell-casting slicker up to. Whatever we've got may be harder, but at least it won't make you want to kill 'em just for being so damn stupid."

"So what do you think we *do* have?"

"I think you've got spirits coming out of the future, just like your totems told you."

"Why?"

"Beats me, city boy. Maybe you should talk to them and find out."

"That's why..."

"...you're here. Right. Okay, so let's talk about non-goetic reversal. I'm going to assume here that you'd prefer not trying to off God yourself or anything like that, okay? So you have to approach the subject on a layer that doesn't tie into the big picture so readily...." A whole lot of shamanic technicalities follow. When she's done, though, I've got a good picture of the sort of chase I'll need to make, right up against the Gauntlet between spirit and matter and as near as possible to the fleeing spirits' point of arrival.

By the time we're done waving our hands and drawing lines in the dirt and making sure that we're talking about the same things when it comes to the world's edges, it's getting dark. Being Marilyn, she's put on some stew, and it's ready to serve up. At my suggestion, we take it back out to the porch, so that I can keep an eye on the Rubbishes (and not provide them with any incentive to try coming inside) and just enjoy the rural evening, so very different from my usual experience. I stretch out my legs and eat in comfortable silence.

Once it's fully dark, we get to work. Marilyn's got a good tape recorder, and she starts me working on reversed speech by itself. It's hard. Like most people who don't speak a tonal language, I don't think much about sounds in time, evolving as I make them. But a drawn-out vowel sounds different when it's drawn the other way. So do a lot of consonants. The transitions and spaces between sounds are often strange themselves, since breath going the other way isn't something you expect to

hear regularly in conversation. Furthermore, many of the sounds that one can recognize in reversed speech turn out to be illusions, pieces of overlapping words that sound enough like something regular that the mind imposes the guessed meaning on it. The longer reversed speech goes on, the more of these show up, and the more work it takes to hear and properly re-reverse the actual speech.

I feel like I should be doing a commercial for durable tapes and recorders by midnight or so. Speak. Record. Reverse. Play back. Analyze. Repeat. Again, and again, and again. It's well into the new morning before I manage to get two sentences in a row understood and spoken reversed to Marilyn's satisfaction. Finally she says, "That's a pretty good start. Get some rest, and we'll pick up there in the morning. Say, you will help with the feed, right?"

## WILLIAMI

Within ten minutes of getting off the plane in Tuzla, I've run into an old friend. Figures.

Now, Sarajevo isn't what you'd want to call much of a tourist destination. There's still a lot of damage from the various rounds of war, and the Bosnians are just too damn poor to afford much reconstruction themselves and too damn screwed by the European Union (and, to a lesser degree, by the US) to have any outside help except for the ongoing military presence necessary to keep *more* war from happening. I was there for the '84 Olympics, helping arrange bugs and surveillance, and it was so beautiful then that I've tried to avoid it ever

since. No point in messing up some very happy memories. Still, a fair amount of traffic does go through there each year: there is some business to be done in Bosnia, and there's the military, scientists, all kinds of people.

Tuzla is a different story. It's north of Sarajevo, closer to the Serbian border and places where there's still a lot of active conflict, and it's in the midst of a region with an even more thoroughly ruined economy. I've noticed over the years that virtually every city looks beautiful when you fly into it, no matter how crappy it may be once you get to the ground. Flying into Tuzla, on the other hand, is like flying down to the Moon or maybe Io, barren and brightly colored primarily with toxic wastes and industrial ruins. The question to ponder here isn't so much "Where does all that beauty go when you're standing on the sidewalk?" but "How the hell does anyone live in this kind of a place?"

So we land, one of a whole three private planes spread across six runways at the moment, and the steward helps me get my wheelchair out of the plane and down to the terminal, and I'm looking around, when someone standing close behind me booms out, "Bill, you son of a bitch! There aren't any sheep worth molesting left in this goddamn country, man! You want Scotland, not Bosnia!"

I turn around to see Terry Vineces, whom I last saw on the night I blew up my lab and left the Virtual Adepts forever. Terry was my touchstone during those months of growing alienation, but where I realized the advantages of joining with the folks the VAs had tried to leave behind, Terry said that he

was going to make his own way in the world. As a point of personal honor (which seldom concerns me, but variety's the spice of life), I never made an effort to find out what happened to him; I always figured that he'd have ended up dead in some back alley or dumped in some handy river long ago. The war of paradigms isn't kind to the would-be brave independents. I did not expect to find him here and now.

"Terry? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Stalking you, of course!" He waves a hand at the airport lounge, such as it is: enclosed on two sides, with half a dozen heavily stained tables and a waitress who looks like she's in the early stages of fossilization. "C'mon, man, let's get a drink."

Soon we're both sipping what purports to be vodka, and certainly is alcohol plus something for flavor. I'm not sure how drunk I could get on it, but if I needed to sterilize any wounds, it'd be just the thing. "Okay, Terry. So what have you been doing..."

"What have I been doing since you headed off to join the outfit you're so sure are the winners? That's pretty simple. I drifted for a while, staying out of the way of everyone while I put together some new identities. Once I had those in place, I arranged for pretty good evidence of my old identity's death, with enough back-story to point anyone who pulled the top layer off down some other wrong directions. Then I drifted some more, until I started making some new contacts here and there. There's always someone drifting out of the war, y'know, and from time to time one of them would have some useful information. One of these guys told me that you were with Ragnarok, and I figured there was a pretty

good chance you'd end up here what with all the hematovore weirdness of late. I was down in Greece, so I wandered up and waited for you."

I stare at my old friend for a while. "Terry, that's pure bullshit, and you know it. You don't just happen to get information about what the project's up to, and you don't just happen to hang around in hopes that I'll show up." I rest my left hand on the wheelchair armrest, not too far from the button that fires the three-shot pistol built into the frame. "Want to try again?"

He continues to smile as he sips his drink. "You always were a clever little guy, Bill. What do you think I'm up to, then?"

"You want a fucking PowerPoint presentation?"

"Nah, nah, save the graphics for later. Just give me your guesses."

"Okay," I say. "I'd have to think a little bit more about how I'd want to rank the probabilities here, but this should cover the top few: You didn't leave the Adepts, or they took you back, and you're working on a hit team, solo or with partners I haven't spotted yet. Or you've joined one of the other traditions, and ditto. Or you joined some other part of the Union and are here to test my loyalty. Or you're not really Terry, just a very good job of cosmetics or robotics or something else, sounding me out and then set to kill me. Those are the big ones, I think, with sub-branches for whether you are or are not aware of the truth."

Now he laughs, that familiar bray. "Not bad, buddy, but you're still stuck in the same old payoff matrix."

"Oh, God," I sigh. "You're going to tell me you found some secret enlightenment that set you free from it all. Who's your guru?"

He puts the drink down and waves away the waitress when she looks like she might come around to refill it. (Surprisingly good service, actually. Customers must be a bit of a rarity for her.) "Nobody at all. And that's just the point."

"I'll thank you not to go poaching on my territory, thanks. Nihilism is *my* pet cause. You go find yourself some other."

"Aw, fuck, Bill, you're not a nihilist, you're a goddamn disillusioned romantic. You're bitter precisely because you keep expecting or at least hoping that the world will turn out more like New York on a good day and less like...." He waves at the rubble beyond the runways. "You always talk big, but your thoughts are too damn small."

That pisses me off, and I start to say something. Then I think better of it. "Like I'd trust your psychology any day. But go on, tell me the rest."

"You left the hippies to go join the Man, but you never got over your conviction that there is some authority that you need to be serving. Now you call it a cosmology or a worldview or a methodology rather than a guru, but it's the same old shit. I did something better. I got out of the guru market altogether, and started working for myself in a cosmological sense."

If this turns out to be as stupid as I think, I'm going to be very angry with my old friend for wasting his mind so much. "Tell me you haven't gone into chaos magic. Please."

"Nothing so formal. They've got their own problems, anyway: they're just putting their hope for cosmic masters off into the future. They haven't gotten over hoping for someone to tell them what to do, even if it's themselves down the road a ways. Same old trap."

That surprises me, at least a bit. "All right, I'll have to give you credit for a pretty thoroughgoing nihilism. So what have you been doing, you liberated guy?"

He thumps the table. "A table."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"You hear the thump, and you think of the tissues that made up the tree, the chemical composition of the finish, the atomic structure of it all, the acoustics, all that." He sees me nod. "Our old buddies among the Adepts would be inclined to describe it in terms of their theories about information units and relationship matrices. Others would talk about spirits, or the four or five elements, or whatever." He looks at me seriously for the first time. "The mistake all of you are making is that you're ascribing an identity to it all. The table is what you perceive; everything is explanation. And I choose another explanation."

His hand shimmers. The table does, too. I can't quite focus on it, as though it were moving around rapidly. It slides through colors and textures as fast as I can assimilate them and then some. He lifts his hand, and the effect stops. "Still a table. I just stopped caring about its details, and since nothing else defines it but the perception, and since you didn't know how to impose your perception back

on it, it wandered through possibilities. If I were alone, I could have made it go away altogether. I could even with others around, but it's a bit more work."

I look up at him, back at the table, up at him again. "Terry, I think I may have to kill you."

"You might, buddy. But maybe you want to hold off just a bit. After all, I'm here to make you an offer."

## TING XIAN

The storms howl with fresh vigor through the underworld, and eventually I give up trying to maintain a corporeal form altogether. I flow through canyons and crevasses as a particularly dense mist, solidifying only when I need to cling to something during a particularly intense gust. It's hard to judge the passage of time in all of these, and I soon cease to worry about it very much. If I manage to stay heading more or less west and make some kind of progress, I'll be doing pretty well.

I'm aware of following a route that I never could have before. The yang awareness I now carry illuminates weaknesses within yin, like a spotlight I can shine into dark corners. It lets me see both opportunities and hazards that I'd have missed otherwise. Without it, I'd have been forced to retreat to the material world, or have been caught by one of the shades prowling in search of spiritual food.

I still wish I knew a great deal more about why I have this new awareness. During some of my occasional rests, I reflect on tales I'd heard among

the Uygur about a strange "red eye" in the night sky, visible to those with a particular kind of sensitivity. The sense of doom they said they felt from it certainly matches what I felt when that red light cast me back into the world and cut me off from my ancestors. Recovering my own soul's strengths by a reunion with my place of awakening makes enough sense, but I have the uncomfortable sense of having been chosen for an unknown destiny by an unknown power, something behind and beyond that magician who appeared to me the once. And above all, I dislike ignorance. But right now I can't identify any very promising route to answers apart from the one I'm already taking, to see if I can consult again with my ancestors.

After a long while of this ghostly passage, I decide to return to the world and see if I can make my way by some more mundane means. I rise close to the world's skin, to listen to what people nearest to death say, and gradually establish that I'm somewhere in Shaanxi province. Xinjiang is still very far ahead, but Beijing is now well behind me, and there shouldn't be any great risk of pursuit. And I have an advantage here: two of my good friends and former colleagues work here, one in the city of Yanan itself, one in the hinterlands not far away. If I can make contact with one or another of them, I can secure transportation that would be very difficult to trace back to me. So I think, at least.

Northern Shaanxi has awesomely rugged terrain. It looks, to my perhaps academically inclined eye, like a vast array of props and paintings. These nearly vertical gorges and heavily terraced hillsides

above barely tamed river rapids have been the stuff of paintings for the better part of two thousand years, and they are very familiar to anyone who's studied Chinese art at all. They're also no fun to walk on, and I cross back and forth between the world and the yin realms, making my way down from an undeveloped crest to one of the roads that runs along the river to Yanan.

As I walk, I think about what I'll tell my friends and what I want them to do for me. "Hello, Lisung, I'm on the run from hungry ghosts and the police, and I'd like your help in escaping to some other jurisdiction." Not quite. "Hello, Dou, I realize it's been a while since I wrote, but would you be willing to give me a truck and not report it missing for a couple of weeks?" No. It's not that they would automatically refuse to help me, but they would need a reason that fits their view of the world. They know that I've had dealing with gangs and outcasts, so I could build on that. "Hello, Dou, I've run afoul of Colonel Tan's pet smugglers, and they set me up on false charges. I can get clear of it if I can meet with the colonel's adjunct, but I have to show up on his doorstep before he'll listen to me. Can you lose a truck or car in the paperwork for a week?" That sounds more plausible, and it's even partly true.

In midsummer, fires in the Shaanxi hills are no surprise at all, so I don't pay much heed to the fact of smoke ahead of me. The local firefighters are very good at their work, and they'll keep the roads clear even while battling quite intense blazes. It would be good for me to find a vehicle to ride in

if the fire's anywhere too close to the road, but otherwise I have very little to be concerned with. (It took a long time for me to develop this kind of poise, and Dou helped. She was my partner in fire training in Xinjiang, and did so much to show me as well as tell me what's safe near a modern forest fire.)

Then I do turn the last corner before the valley where the fire is, and I see clearly what's going on. Down the next slope from me is the Yangjialing Revolutionary Site. This is where Mao ran the Communist Party in the forties, leading the anti-fascist war that cowardly Chiang Kai-shek wouldn't, and simultaneously directing a massive program of land reform and modernization behind the front lines. The various public halls and some of the private spaces became a sprawling museum after the government relocated to Beijing, and it's all still a popular tourist attraction. Even lapsed or hesitant Communists like me often find something inspiring here, in this place where a handful of dedicated men and women really did change the fate of our nation using little more than their own determination. It's a reminder of what one can accomplish, at least, and the memorabilia brings to mind the society that they displaced, with its petty injustices and greater crimes against human dignity.

At least that's what *was* down the slope. Now it's all on fire. Right in the middle of it there must be some particularly hot blaze, since the smoke and flames all rush inward to rise up in a deceptively narrow column. I shield my eyes and widen the inner pupils to the flow of yin, and can make out many bodies along with a few still-struggling but obvi-

ously doomed souls. The firefighters of many nearby districts do their best, and it amounts to no more than containment. The fire itself is, I soon realize, far from purely natural. It's shot through with veins of potent yang, which had to have been pulled into the world by someone's tedious labor, and possibly held in place by charms of some sort. This is a sorcerer's arson. I don't need to examine every body to know that my friend is one of them, nor to suspect that it burns only because she was my friend.

I walk carefully alongside the highway but don't bother taking the turnoff toward the historical site. There's nothing there for me now. I must get to Yanan, I think. In the very moment that that thought crosses my mind, I turn another corner, and can see farther down the valley. There is smoke rising from Yanan or its environs, too. This is too much. I drop through the world and into the yin realms again. Some other road will have to get me where I need to go.

## ROBERT

It seems like forever that I've been working with Marilyn on dealing safely with "my" time-reversed spirits, though it's just been a few days. She keeps putting me through my paces, refining my comprehension of reversed speech and my ability to form reversed sentences on demand. The reversed movements are just as hard, since there are so many taboos of position and movement among the spirits and I want to avoid giving any unintentional offense to the very ones I want to speak with. She

concedes that I'm doing "pretty well," which is high praise from her.

After a week of this, she puts me to the test, calling up her own totem (a very conventional falcon, and how I envy her), and explaining the situation to him. He's apparently heard a bit about the strangeness himself and decides to provide me with a field test. He comes to me in my dreams that night, looping backward and forward through time at varying rates, and forces me to explain long and detailed matters to him. The dream ends with a classroom scene in which he issues me my report card, showing that I maintained almost perfect coherence even through his shifts in direction. When I wake, both he and Marilyn profess themselves pleased.

Marilyn and I both know it's time for me to go. "I hate to leave so soon," I say. "I keep meaning to come for a longer visit, but..." I peter out.

"I know," she says with one of her amused little snorts. "You and me, we've each got our little tribe to tend to, and it's a full-time job. You'll come and see me, or I'll come up there for a spell, when duty requires and fate allows, same as always." She gives me a hug before I stow the last of my bags. "You take care, Bob. The world isn't so rich in seers and doers that it can afford to lose even one of them." And with that I'm on the road again, from Mount Pleasant to Charleston and then from there by air back to New York. No point in taking up any more time now that I'm at least a little trained for what I need to do.

## TING XIAN

I enter the yin realms to find that I've become haunted. The burning historical site is quite visible here among the shadows, the terrible stench and angry flames not offset by any fresh breeze or living scents. I can hear the steady refrain of small tears in the shroud between worlds as more and more of the fire's victims fall through into death. And I hear the ensuing screams; it hasn't taken long for predators to catch the scent and gather around, and I lack the means to drive more than a few of the soul-eating beasts off.

Some of the ghosts around the periphery of the fire manage to scramble up ghostly ravines before the beasts notice them. The ones coming in my direction see the vitality of my aura and flock to me instinctually. Like living people in shock but more so, they lack the strength of coherent thought. They know only that something terrible has happened to them and that they must find relief even before they find answers. I seem less dazed than them, and therefore, in their muddled minds I am the sum of mother, nurse, priest and judge—The One Who Knows in all her facets.

Fortunately for them, I do know a fair amount. I lead as many as I can up over the nearest crest and down the other side. Here are small caves near the waterline, flooded in the living world when dams raised the river level in the late forties. The caves were important hiding and meeting places in the early decades of the revolution, though, and the passion invested in them protects them still. Doors made of the rebels' memories of concealed

stone and wood let the new ghosts duck inside and shield themselves from the hunting beasts. We can hear their growls outside, and we will know that it's safe to leave when quiet returns.

I look from one ghostly face to the next, and almost weep when I see that one of them is my friend, Dou. She doesn't recognize me; she has the blank look common to so many of the recently dead. She can say nothing but a few muttered words like "help" and "run," and the ones that chill me, "Red eye, red eye." As she says this, she points at the eyes of someone still vivid in her memory. The others take up the chant, "Red eye, red eye," and they all point at one eye and then another of someone they imagine standing in their midst. Their intensity ebbs and flows for most of an hour, before they all gradually wind back down to the typical post-mortem daze.

Whoever or whatever it was with the red eye was presumably the last thing they saw while alive, and quite likely was responsible for the fire. A malicious yang-attuned magician might call forth burning yang and then stride through it in search of his (or her) prey. It might also be some predator of the yang realms, pulled across the mirrorlands by such a magician and sent to hunt amid the flames it would find very comfortable. I don't know, and since it'll be some while before these souls recover their coherence, speculation is almost certainly a waste of time.

The noise beyond the caves seems to have largely settled down, so I take a chance on stepping outside. I leave the new ghosts behind me.

The hunting beasts have left deep tracks in the shadowy mud around our cave, but apparently never quite picked up our scent by the threshold, and they are gone. Quickly I climb the ridge and see that the fire's almost burned itself out. It has very little yin force now: what's left in the material world must be mostly smoldering ruins. Here, the debris of the halls and their valued contents lie in pieces, which will take hours or days to coalesce into relic forms. In a week or two, perhaps, there will be a complete memorial of the site, ready for the Jade Emperor's soldiers to take over for their master.

(If, that is, there were either the master or the soldiers to still do the job. I suppose that as things are now, the remaining soldiers must huddle in the great palace, and the maelstrom winds will take this place apart once more.)

Still unsettled by the new ghosts' chant, I look up and all around for anything that might fit the description "red eye." I find nothing. The flames burn white and gray rather than red, and the storm clouds high overhead have an occasional vivid yellow or green flash of lightning, but no red. The moon would be bone and ash if I could see it, and the sun would be its usual pale self, I presume. In any event, the clouds screen both of them. The red eyes have apparently receded for the moment, perhaps hunting me elsewhere. It would no doubt be handy to have some defense, and I think about descending to pick up as intact a relic pistol or rifle as I can find among the now-cooling ruins, but something tells me that it's not entirely safe there yet.

Intuition reaps its reward as I watch. A straggler ghost rises out of a two-story-high pile of stones that have not yet begun to reassemble their lost shape. He wears a military uniform but lacks the air of command, and it takes me just a moment to realize that he must be one of the actors who delivers great speeches in the slightly sanitized style of the revolutionary heroes. Despite his slow start, he seems less dazed than my charges did, and he proceeds purposefully through the labyrinth of ruins toward the Yanan road. Unfortunately for him, at least one of the beasts remained behind. He doesn't even have time to cry out before it leaps from its concealment behind an arched doorway and rips through his neck, releasing a bubbling hiss of ectoplasm. Where there's one, I think, there's likely more. Weaponry will have to wait.

## WILLIAM

"Okay, Terry," I say, "you've got my attention. Tell me what's up."

We've adjourned from the airport lounge to the hotel room I reserved as a base of operations. This time we've got something to drink that actually is vodka, or at least a much better approximation, and I'm feeling pretty comfortable. Jet lag will beat the shit out of my rest later, but I'll deal with that when it comes. For now I'm plenty awake, wondering what the hell my old friend is up to and still feeling pretty sure that I'll have to kill him before much more time goes by.

"You weren't too far off," he says after another long sip, "about that guru thing. After I split from the Adepts, I did spend quite a while putzing around in search of someone who'd tell me the real story. You know what things are like on the fringes of the Traditions"—I nod at that—"so you can probably list most of the folks I hung out with, the first few years."

"But none of them would show you that table trick. I'm not even sure I understand it myself, assuming it was real." I keep that in mind as by far the most probable explanation. Nearly everything that the credulous think of as magic is purely a matter of perception. It is a fucked-up and disorderly universe, but less so than they'd like it to be. I've got both physical shielding and extensive training in mental discipline to resist the effects of most kinds of manipulation; I also realize that no defense is perfect (just as no offense is), and I figure that self-scrutiny is always, always, always in order.

He smiles and nods at that. "You're wondering how you can establish that I'm not tricking you. We can work out a protocol for that later, maybe. For now let me tell you the rest of the story."

"I'm all ears." I feel a sudden hot tingling all over my skin, and for the briefest instant I *am* all ears, a human-shaped mass of ears. It's gone before I can even fully register what's going on. It leaves me badly shaken.

Terry, meanwhile, is just about laughing his ass off. "C'mon, man, it was great when Tex Avery did it in that one cartoon and it's still great. Loosen up!"

"Fuck you, Terry. Nihilism hasn't improved your taste any. Get on with the story."

"Yes, sir," he says with a sarcastic salute. "So there I was, scrounging my way through one magical scam after another, and gradually becoming more and more disillusioned with the whole thing. That was when I started noticing just how much things would break down when I was right on the brink of full-bore trance or of passing out, whether I was trying to introduce anything deliberate or not."

"Oh yeah," I interrupt. "Very common problem with all sorts of semi-conscious psychic phenomena."

"Still hoping for a definition, aren't you?" He sneers rather than laughing this time. "That's the crucial difference right there, really. I looked at what was happening to me and took it where it led. You're still busy trying to shovel it into a mold that you find convenient. Or 'true,' or whatever you may want to call it. All the same thing in the end." He leans forward earnestly. "*Definition is a lie.*"

I'm not impressed at that. Despite his power, whatever it may turn out to be, this is the stuff of college philosophy, and not very good philosophy at that. "You do realize just how tautological this all is."

"Ha. Fuck your meta-discourse levels. I'm just telling you what's left after all the molds break and you're standing in the midst of raw experience for the first time. There isn't anything at all unless you make it happen. That's as true of words and numbers as it is of gods and demons." He spreads his

hands out and claps them together. "Nothing at all. Not even air to push around. That's just one more part of the conventional wisdom."

"Can I just disbelieve in *you* and start my time in the airport over again?"

"Sure. Go right ahead." He pauses for a moment and looks for all the world like he expects me to make something happen. "No? Okay. Your loss, my gain. Pretty literally." He takes another sip. "I'd miss booze. Anyway, I started doing some controlled experiments, and I found that if I damaged my perceptions in just the right way, the world would start drifting around, and would keep doing it until I healed the damage and started perceiving it again in a consistent fashion. And I discovered that there are some other folks who've been studying this thing for a long time now."

"You found your guru in a black hole."

"Pretty close, spunky. One night I let go of my whole hotel room. The rest of the city was still there, starting with the hallway, but it was all miles away. Close up at hand, there was just me and nothing else. Not even blackness, since there wasn't space to lack color. It was the best absence there ever was. Wasn't. Whatever. I loved it, I knew that much." He looks genuinely happy with the memories, too, and I begin to wonder just how far his mind has gone. "And then the other guy came in, walking out of the hallway and into the emptiness my mind had made. Nothing very flashy to look at, like a somewhat less ugly young Humphrey Bogart, but there when nothing else was. So that got my attention."

I'd wondered a little if this might be an impostor, but that kind of movie reference ruled out some of the obvious possibilities. It's a thing Terry only did around people he was comfortable and relaxed with, and he wasn't even always aware of it. It's just how his mind made descriptions, apparently. "And what did Humphrey want to sell you, besides encyclopedias?"

"Just about the first thing he said to me, actually, was 'Have you considered the advantages of a really fine set of encyclopedias?' Then he told me the rest, about the power in the void and about how much our power to dissolve the world depends on understanding the specific illusions to be undone. That's where the encyclopedias come into play, you see: more data."

"Terry, you *are* fucking insane, and you're also dangerous."

"Okay, Bill. Shoot me."

"Eh?"

"I know you've got a gun stashed in that chair of yours somewhere. Take whatever you think will help you shoot well and then shoot me down."

"You're serious." I peer at him.

"Absolutely. This is just wasting time if you're going to keep fucking around with second-guessing me. I need you to pay more attention."

"Okay, then," I say, and get my shooter's kit ready. Light-regularizing lenses for the glasses, for low-light enhancement without flash risk. High-decibel earplugs. An amphetamine cocktail plus some tailored neurotransmitter enzymes for energy

without the quivering. Finally the gun itself, sighting through a little slit in the armrest. Three shots in quick order.

The first one hits him and the bullet simply disappears. The second one fires as usual but emerges slowly, and loses momentum with every inch traveled, dropping inert to the floor a foot shy of Terry. The last one doesn't fire at all, but a gray-red goo drips out of the gun barrel. No further shots fire, no matter how I press the trigger or fool with the mechanism.

"There, you see? I got bored with being shot at a long time ago, and I just don't pay enough attention to bullets anymore. You should be glad I do still pay attention to my friends." I still think he's out of his mind, but I have to accept that there's something going on worthy of note, either in my mind or out in the world. "So where was I? Oh, yes, the guy without the encyclopedias. It turns out that there are people who like to live in the void. Probably the direct descendants of the original human beings, since it looks like we emerged spontaneously from the void and created the rest of the world to support our delusional sense of how things ought to be. Most of us never get loose of that, but some do, and I'd just proven myself worth their attention."

"Uh huh. That's, well, not bad as initiation stories go."

"You still don't get it, but that's okay. See, I'm here because I think you *might* get it, with a little effort. I'm from no government and I'm here to help you, so to speak."

"You want to initiate me." Not a question, just making sure I understand.

He takes another sip, and empties his glass. "You got it. Not all at once right now. It's just that I found myself suddenly wondering what my old Bill was up to, and then the next thing I knew I was here, watching you get off that nice little rental jet of yours. So I came up behind you, and you know the rest. I figure I owe you one, with all the stuff going down."

"Like what? I mean, I know what I'd mean if I said that," I explain a little pedantically and a little drunkenly, "but I don't know what you mean by it."

"I mean the fucking end of the world, man. Game over, do not pass go, no extra ball, that's what I mean. You get the front row center seating for the goddamn apocalypse, if you've got the stones to take it."

## ROBERT

I arrive back at the neighborhood where this all began, but while I'd expected to get to the rituals as soon as I checked into my room, I decide not to do that. There's something wrong in this part of the city, and I want to understand it better before I proceed.

Part of the wrongness is in my own memories. I know that I had good reason to seek out Marilyn's help, and have vivid recollections of spirits that remain locked in their backward path through local time. And yet sometimes I remember one of them

managing to speak to me in forward time, or perhaps me managing to understand it despite the reversal. I strongly suspect that this is a bit of future memory intruding into my present consciousness. I've never had the experience myself, but many shamans have, and it's a fairly well studied phenomenon. Since the realms that are home to the deepest layers of the soul lie outside time, those of us who habitually poke around beneath the skin of things do sometimes encounter these moments which are part of our lives, but have not yet happened in the realm of mundane experience. I certainly hope that's the case here, as the alternatives—like altered memories of the past or, worse yet, an actually altered past—would be far worse.

Part of the problem, though, is the people. In any large city you find plenty of drifters whose souls are very weak, and the various spirits that prey on them. Anywhere there's a lot of misery, there's a whole ecology of nasty, infesting spirits who drain the health out of their victims and mess with their surroundings to make the miseries worse. These are our patients, in our role as surgeons to the health of our chosen/called communities. What I'm seeing around me now, though, is different from the usual in two ways.

First, there are a whole lot more of those weak-souled types than usual here. Some of them seem to be damaged local residents, others drifters from outside. You've seen the sort of people I mean, and noticed how they're often busy talking to nobody visible. When they're lucky, they're talking to a spirit or dream-form projection of one of us sha-

mans; when they're not, they're being tormented by banes and other nasty spirits, and trying to cope as best they can, just as you'd try to cope with an obnoxious hanger-on who won't shut up and won't go away. (It usually works about as well for them as it does for you, too.) Anyway, where normally maybe one person in ten in a big city is like that, here the ratio is more like one in two. There's a tremendously fertile field for all the sorts of spirits that we prefer to keep at bay or away altogether.

Second, there are people much worse off than that. Some of them seem to have had their whole soul, everything beneath memory and subconscious thought, blown clean off. Watching them is like watching near-terminal lepers. The empty husks of their souls are filled up with parasites and monsters of every description. I have to constantly reinforce my defenses: they see me watching them, and would attack me if I left my guard down even for an instant. I feel a deep compassion for the soul-stripped, but they're also terribly dangerous to themselves and everyone else in the vicinity. Left unchecked, they can overwhelm all the normal souls in an entire community and render it spiritually sterile. Once that happens, physical death is inevitable. It's the story of how any great city dies, and after working so hard to bandage up New York's last patch of wounds, I'm eager not to have to do anything like funerary rites again.

I spend half of each day working to protect the room where I'll perform the traveling rites next. I start by sanctifying the room itself and building my favorite little shrine, complete with small mounds

of debris in which each of the Rubbishes can manifest. From there, I extend my reach down the hall, to the elevators and the shared bathrooms, and into the adjoining rooms each time one is empty. I've spent more than enough time in Third World blights to have no problem bringing housekeeping for a little private time. One or two of the maids actually recognizes at least some of what I'm doing, and one tells me how glad she is that *el brujo* is on the job like this. After a couple of weeks, my room's whole floor and most of the levels above and below it are purified.

It's a good thing I started right in on the defenses, too. The passenger banes waste little time in identifying me as a threat and sending up scouting parties to test my strength. Light taps against the windows give way to stronger and stronger attempts, finally tossing out the cover of secrecy altogether in favor of both psychic and physical assaults. For the moment, though, my mind and body remain my own. I meditate and chant and study and try to figure out how the hell I want to proceed.

## WILLIAM

"Terry," I say with an exasperated sigh to cover my anxieties. "I'd love to hear your thoughts about the end of the world, but I've got a job to do. You obviously know enough that you can know what I'm doing, if you care, so I won't make a big show of secrecy. You want to ride along while I get something useful done, or you want to wait until I'm back?"

He smiles. "I'll ride along. We'll have time to talk, if we're going where I think you are." And with that he heads out to his own room.

I don't sleep very well. My dreams, and my waking moments, are troubled with memories of what I thought I saw him do and what it might all mean. I still think it's most likely that he's managing to hypnotize me or project a series of well-crafted illusions. He could be using some form of psionic manipulation, and he could have... well, an operational open-environment nanotech array or something like that. None of those options are all that reassuring, though, particularly not given the really thick solipsism he's apparently been soaking in for a while now. I figure that my best bet is simply to keep him talking long enough to find out what he wants, and then see how I can deal with it.

In the morning, we eat breakfast in the hotel—sticking to the packaged cold cereal, since the sanitation just doesn't inspire any confidence in the cooked food—and manage to find one of about three vans in the city equipped with a wheelchair lift. Terry's obviously amused by the whole thing, and that actually gives me some relief. I would worry about him more if his apparent power were linked to some grand crusading ideology. Self-interest is a hell of a lot easier to work with than the conviction that somebody else needs good done to them against their will.

I can't tell anything useful about the history of this damn van. It's obviously an Eastern European knock-off of an American design, and it may well be as old as I am. The accessibility conversion was

definitely done in the late seventies or early eighties: it uses a particular combination of levers and cranks that was popular with American designers for about five minutes, until they realized four ways to simplify the whole thing, and with disability "experts" for another five years or so. It's a better setup than, say, having me get out and push the car with the help of my wheelchair's motor. It's better than coating the inside of the vehicle with ground glass and disease-laden chili power. It is not a whole *lot* better than that, and I curse frequently and loudly as I settle in and try to make the van start. Terry finds it all terribly funny.

Having programmed a couple of doppelganger systems myself, I'm under no illusion about the limits of impersonation. This entity beside me could be Terry with elaborate mental engineering, or someone schooled to impersonate him, or someone programmed to think he's him.... The possibilities go on and on. So when I start probing at his memories of experiences we've shared, it's not really out of any conviction that I can detect tampering or imitation, just the vague hope that he will show reactions that I could find reassuring. The first such opportunity arises as we drive out of Tuzla's city limits, from the main highway running toward Lukavac and Gracacina, then onto the secondary road to Bijela, and then onto a smaller road that'll take us past Donja Dragunija.

I look over at him and say in an affectedly earnest tone, "Faraway towns with strange names like..."

He blinks in confusion, then gets it. "Like Smegma," he says in much the same voice.

"... Spasmodic..."

"... Frog..."

"... and the far-flung Isles of Langerhans," we say in unison.

"Man," he adds after a moment. "I haven't even thought about Firesign Theatre in years, and I bet I could still do the rest of that sketch from memory." He gives it a good shot, too, pattering out most of *The Lonesome American Choo-Choo Don' Wan' Stop Here Any Mo'* without a hitch. We spend a while trading riffs from other Firesign Theatre sketches, and some Monty Python, and a bit of this and that. I'm certainly sharing this vehicle with someone who knows what Terry used to like, back in the good old days, and who can deliver favorite lines with the same panache. It's a good sign, or at least not a bad one.

One of my colleagues came back from a scouting mission to Herzegovina a couple years ago and described it as the Rust Belt's nightmares. That's about right for this part of Bosnia, too. There is so much wrong, and there has been for so long. The Soviets did... well, not irreparable, but deep and lasting damage to any concept of scientific management with their ham-fisted totalitarian bullshit. Being the biggest thug on the block is not the same as being the best-informed planner, but they never got that, and they've linked the two for a long time to come. Then came the collapse of that damned empire and the rise of the local tyrants, who sure as

hell didn't care any more, and then the war, and now just plain grinding poverty and neglect.

This land might not be the most fertile there ever was, but it could feed the people and provide all the mineral wealth necessary for a great industrial base, if only it were run right. Instead, we drive through the remains of bombed-out factories surrounded by outcroppings of bedrock, where the topsoil's completely washed away. Here are dead fields piled high with ruined cars and tractors, leaking out oil and other fluids to guarantee that the soil won't support anything you'd want to eat. Occasionally I notice a cluster of faces peering through holes in a more or less intact wall, and I know that on the other side is a little pocket of not-too-bad land that's yielding some produce to keep the people tending it going a little longer.

"I wish we could just buy this place outright," I say to my passenger. "Fence it off for a couple of years, rebuild it from scratch, and the people here would actually have something worth living in."

He shakes his head with an ironic smile. "So much effort. You're still the busy little beaver who's going to save the world, aren't you?"

"And this is where you tell me that the world's too big or too doomed or something to save, I take it." I don't bother looking over—I can see enough of his expression in the mirrors, and I'm in a tricky patch of road here. Well, it's partly road, but more artillery craters and what look like sink holes. I vaguely remember reading that the water tables are down all over the country thanks to the environmental damage from the wars. Something like that, anyway. I'm down to about twenty mph and steer-

ing with a lot more care than I usually exert, since if we run off the road here, we could be well and truly stuck for a while.

"Nah." He pauses for a moment, bracing himself as I slalom through a series of deep cracks in the pavement. "I'm trying to tell you that the world's not fucking real enough to save. You're sweating yourself into an early grave over someone's nightmare. The only thing really there besides us is the void, and the sooner you get on with it, the better for you."

I sigh. "Gee, thanks. I really appreciate that." From there the conversation shifts to the whereabouts of our former colleagues in the Virtual Adepts (most of them dead, a few insane, a few missing, a handful still practicing as nearly as either of us knows) and of some of our various enemies past and present. Once we're caught up—and past the worst of that damaged road and back to a stretch that's just plain been neglected since about 1994—conversation shifts again to what it is I think I'm doing here. I consider lying to him, refusing to answer, or otherwise concealing information, and decide that there's not much point to it. By the time we get to the little valley I'm aiming for north of Donja Dragunija, he knows more about the hematovore problem than some of the people I work with.

He listens, occasionally asking a useful question. Finally, "Okay, so what are you heading to right at the moment?"

"There's a castle up here. The locals generally just call it 'Neznam' if you ask about it. That's

Bosnian for 'I don't know,' and they say it in a way that makes it clear that they don't want to know. And they're right to do so, I guess. There's been a hematovore enclave in the castle since, as nearly as we can tell, the sacking of Byzantium at the start of the thirteenth century. Some of the Byzantine suckers made their way here, displacing some local chieftains and setting themselves up as absolute lords of the region."

"And you're going to see what they're up to, and if they're gone, try to figure out why."

"Right in one."

"I have just one request," he says very seriously, and this time I do turn to look at him. "If anyone has to go down into the dark basement without a flashlight, *you* do it." He breaks up in laughter as I go, and I can barely make out the last three words.

"Fuck you, man," I say with a smile. "I'm gonna scoot up behind and push you down. Then I can study what the mutant rats do when they eat you."

We've been switchbacking up a steep grade on the western slope of a ridge running more or less north and south. We finally get to the top, and there's Neznam, a narrow valley in the space between not-quite-parallel ridges. The domain is a bit under eight miles long and never more than three quarters of a mile wide. A complex castle, repeatedly extended and rebuilt over the centuries, stands on a low rise right down below us, and there are small farms filling up most of the rest of the valley. There's no sign of activity: no animals in the fields, nobody working, no fires lit. The air doesn't smell of smoke close up, just the background

reek from the south. "Nobody home," I comment as I begin the slow descent.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I pull up outside the castle. The general stillness prevails. I'm quite sure that everyone here is dead and gone, one way or another, but I make sure to take my time and observe the evidence. Terry doesn't care. He's out of the van with one good bound and pacing around the outer courtyard while I get my wheelchair out and its defenses primed. When I'm ready, we go through the gates together.

The only good survey of historical landmarks done of this area says that the guts of this fortress date back to the second century A.D., built to be part of the Roman frontier. Back then the valley was open at both ends, so it made sense to put something capable of traffic control here. In the eleventh century, a badly injured crusader settled down here and built a sort of combination fort and monastery on the remains. His heirs were infected or destroyed when the fleeing Byzantine hematovores arrived a couple centuries later. The peasantry proved resistant to HHV, apparently, and they remained as they were. Minor earthquakes collapsed the ends of the valley around the start of the fifteenth century, and after that the area pretty well dropped out of official awareness.

The analysts at Ragnarok first learned of this place in 1999-2000, right after the big bang in Bangladesh. They intercepted widely scattered HHV-EU1 carriers all sending coded transmissions here, through a series of intermediaries, and once a year or so they'd each go back home for a week.

This fit one of the classic patterns for the virus's spread, where the infecting agent sees himself as the father (or mother, as may be) of a brood of progeny—familial metaphors are very common among the virus's victims. I suppose it's easier to think of yourself as having an evil dad than having someone whose immune system happened to collapse before you. Anyway, it's been on the list of Ragnarok secondary targets ever since, until the EU1 mass disappearance hit. I chose this one because the approach is relatively straightforward, and while Bosnia's a mess, it's neither the active war zone nor the bolted-down security zone that surrounds some of the other good candidates.

I assume that none of the old maps available in public archives bear much resemblance to how the place's interior works now. Old hematovores usually go in heavily for customization in general and security in particular. This is one of those times when I really, really wish I had working legs, even with ultralight drones to go scouting ahead of me. Terry continues to look amused as I strap on projection lenses over my regular glasses and launch the drones. They look something like flying propeller beanies, moving almost silently on composite rotors rigged just so. In a few seconds I'm getting transmissions from them, and I send them leapfrogging each other for a general survey.

The place is empty.

Well, it's empty of anything animate. There are plenty of elaborate furnishings, including what are most likely the original Byzantine tapestries brought by the thirteenth century refugees and sculptures

that have a Grecian look about them. There's lavish furniture: not particularly comfortable or heavily padded, but made out of elaborately carved, expensive woods and inlaid with gold and silver. There are also a few modern touches, like computers in armoires that blend in with the older pieces and recessed lighting in most of the hallways and larger rooms. What there aren't are any people moving around.

I spend an hour this way, making my way from attic garrets to sub-basements and back again, and feel pretty sure that I'm not overlooking anyone. There's no residual body heat. That doesn't mean anything by itself when it comes to hematovores, but there also aren't any other traces of recent presence: no minor surface deformations from footprints, no stirring in the dust, and so forth and so on. The drones have good forensic sniffers, and it's all coming up dry. The closest thing to evidence is a half-dozen scorch marks in the dining room and great hall. There aren't any clothes or other artifacts around them, but it's possible that hematovores burned here.

"Nobody home, huh?" Terry asks.

"Nobody," I say. "Let's check it out for ourselves."

## MING XIAN

I have become a curse, it seems. Is this punishment for the disorder in my soul? Perhaps Heaven's circuitous way of taking back too generous a gift? After all, mortal bureaucrats sometimes punish

those who have received too much favor, and the sages say that the celestial hierarchy mirrors the terrestrial.

Abstract thoughts are my cushion against great sorrow. I know this and tell it to myself and yet continue rationalizing. As I returned to the cave where I left my friends and the other ghosts, I saw the door hanging open. That worried me, even before I could tell whether they'd opened it from inside or someone else had forced it from outside. Well before I got there, I could hear the terrible sounds of ghostly corpus being rent. There were no screams, only the feeding.

Somehow I forced myself to finish the descent, wrapped in layers of yang and yin interwoven to pull myself almost, but not quite, back into the world of the living. I moved like a shadow through the dimly lit byways until I stood a dozen meters outside the cave and could peer inside. I saw the remains of the ghosts strewn all over, pieces of their souls still shining like quicksilver, and feeding on them, great black shapes like a frightened cave dweller's nightmare of tigers. Such things have no business so close to the living, but multiple deaths, particularly with great suffering, can sometimes open the way for them.

I don't know whether their victims somehow opened the way. It doesn't really matter. What matters to me is that all those innocent men and women lost their chance at the redemption and maturation the afterlife can bring. I have been separated from my friends a second time, and to the best of my knowledge, nothing can bring them back

from the fate they endured in the cave. It was with a heavy heart that I turned away from the whole area and made my way south, not following any of the major roads of the dead, toward the ancient capital of Yu Huang's empire.

Distance is a flexible thing outside the boundaries of matter. Significance shapes proximity, as does a whole constellation of other sorts of meaning. On this trip I yearn most of all for obscurity, and my enlarged vision shows me the way through paths where the terrain of yin is complicated by infusions of yang. Before my second awakening, I'd have avoided some of these places as the equivalent of quicksand and dens of vipers. Now I can see clearly, making my way quietly and calmly through channels where the Emperor's patrols never went. Shaanxi province is as settled as any in China, but even here there are places where so few people ever died that the spiritual landscape is almost completely pristine. The deaths of animals and plants have shaped it, but their force is small. It is a wilderness of the dead, and I have the time to contemplate all that's happening to me.

Even as I depend on the yang sympathy within me, I wish very much there were some way I could be rid of it. Each evening, as it's measured in the mortal world, the wind rises for a few minutes and carries the voices of those who died that day. This is not a wind native to the yin realms, but the creation of my one-time allies and mentors in the Wu Keng. It's targeted at me, though since they don't know where I am precisely, they cast their effect widely. Every day I hear the sobbing of others

who've died because of me: former colleagues, former students from when I taught in the Beijing schools, family and friends. The toll mounts steadily, and I guess that it's just a matter of time before some of the slain find me and try to exact vengeance. I must find some way of defending myself as I continue to search.

## ROBERT

No more of the time-reversed spirits appear. There are times when shamanic duty is a lot like waiting for the bus, frankly: the next one will show up the moment you're off your guard. Unfortunately, other things need my attention just as much.

I'm long accustomed to living in the midst of significance disguised as coincidence. Everyone does, but most people either don't realize it or do their best to shut out the sometimes uncomfortable realization. Me and my kind, we wade in and welcome it, looking for what message it might have for us or for the communities we minister to. So I'm the first in the hotel to notice something strange going on, though not the last.

It begins two days after I arrive, when alarm clocks go off for the people working on the day shift. Every single one of them goes off at precisely the same time. Nobody's running a few minutes fast or slow, or has set hers for a few minutes different than anyone else. Exactly 6:30 A.M., every single one of them, and not one delayed by battery strength fluctuating or anything else at all. The moment passes as they get underway: this guy takes longer

in the shower, that couple goes back to bed, this woman realizes she's hung over and takes some time to administer a home-grown remedy, all the normal fluctuations. Still, I find it disturbing. So do my totems, but neither of them can find any explanation.

Half of shamanism is about altered states of consciousness, which means that if you're surrounded by serious drunks and addicts, you have a good pool of untrained talent available to check your own impressions of the spirit world and its doings. I make the rounds that morning, but the usual crowd in the lobby and on the steps outside hasn't noticed anything unusual. Apart from me being more agitated than usual, that is. It's with a distinct sense of unease that I go about my day's errands, shopping in the local markets for more of the exotic herbs I need for large-scale wards and checking out all the spots where the time-reversed spirits made their mark. The world's walls remain unusually weak there, but there's no fresh activity; this is the sort of wound that heals in time, if nobody pokes at it further, and the spots are all enough out of the way that they aren't getting a lot of random traffic from drifters with just enough spiritual sensitivity to be dangerous.

The next day, the alarm clocks all synchronize again, and today it lasts a good ten minutes or so. The morning toilet flushes proceed from north to south in steady rhythm, as do the bathroom doors slamming shut behind their first users of the day. Everyone around me shuts off his alarm in sync, too. Only gradually does disorder return.

Once is either coincidence or a message for someone other than me. Twice in a row just as I'm preparing for a major work means it's something I need to deal with. I suspend my preparations for the day in favor of more time studying my neighbors, and speaking with a few. They're a fairly homogenous crew: mostly single men, mostly about twenty-five to forty years old, pretty evenly divided between whites, blacks and Hispanics, few of them doing anything but day labor or semi-skilled labor on contract projects. Some of them are married, and there are some single women and a few gay couples, but those are all rare. And all of them look like what they are—tired workers who lack any real hope of improving their prospects and who have to worry about what injury or illness or any other misfortune might do to them.

A fair number of these guys have problems with drink and drugs, though not usually very severely. If it takes over their lives, they lose the ability to sustain this kind of work and drop down a few more rungs on the social ladder. In this crowd, Mike and Louie stand out, because they're almost constantly strung out on something or other, their eyes blood-shot and glazed, their voices quavering, their manner distracted. What I realize, this second day of ominous synchronization, is that they're most thoroughly immersed in it all. They stumble but don't quite fall over, drop something and then snatch it before it hits the ground, laze along with bouts of unobvious speed just fast enough and long enough to get across streets safely.

They don't have any work today, so I offer to buy them lunch at the taqueria down the block, and they take me up on it. Mike is probably a couple years older than Louie, a couple inches taller and clean-shaven, while Louie has a scruffy little goatee. They're both pale skinned and dressed in T-shirts for second-string bands' tours from half a dozen years ago.

"You guys have seen me around, I know," I say. "Sometimes I write for the papers about how the folks in my neighborhood see things, you know?" They nod. Journalists of that type are a known phenomenon to anyone who lives in New York neighborhoods someone might deem colorful. "Well, I'm supposed to be doing this story about anything new in how the folks like us are thinking about things." They pause for a moment to work it over, then nod again. "So how about you guys? Anything new in glamorous downtown Youville?" I get out a notepad and mechanical pencil, and they laugh. They're at ease with this.

"It's the New World Order," Mike says after a moment, and I can hear the capital letters. I make a note. "I always used to hear about how they were going to impose their order on the world, and now they are."

"You sound," I say cautiously, "like you're talking about something besides banking regulations."

"Oh, yeah," Mike nods. Not vigorously by most people's standards, but maybe it's as much as he can manage right now. "I'm talking about the way the world works." He's ordered a grilled cheese sandwich, and now he takes the top piece of bread off and drops it on the floor. It lands buttered side up.

Again and again, as often as he repeats it. "That's what I'm talking about. Our benevolent masters started fucking with gravity and everything, just to give us a nicer world."

I do my best to look skeptical rather than alarmed. "That's a heck of a government, that'd be."

Louie gives me a raspberry. "Never mind governments, man, this is about people making themselves God and poking at the rest of us. It's all about taking the chance out of everything for the sake of some damn five year plan."

"You're talking about magic?"

Louie's on a roll. "I'm talking about magic the way I'd be talking about retirement plans if I killed myself. This is about the death of everything random and uncontrolled."

I take some more notes. "That's pretty fancy language for a couple of day laborers. What's your background?"

They look at each other. Mike answers. "We met at CUNY about nine years ago now. We got along, and we picked up some habits from each other. Eventually we got wasted enough to flunk out together. We hang together because we get along, and maybe one of us will make the right score someday."

"Gotcha." More notes on my pad. "So who're the bosses out killing magic, you think?"

"Nobody you've ever heard of," they say together. The unity of response makes them both smile. Louie continues. "Nobody you've ever heard of. They work through fronts, and those work through fronts, and *those* make the kind of politics

and economics any of us ever encounter. That's just the veneer of the curtain over the stage with the show to distract us, and the real action is back behind that."

"Sounds depressing," I venture.

"Fuckin' A," Mike breaks in. "It's no fun at all. But I think maybe we're done talking about this now. You're asking a lot of questions, right? Come and talk to us when you've got some answers of your own." They get up and walk out together, trailing little pockets of that improbable order.

I stir up the discarded sandwich wrappings, ketchup packages, and miscellaneous trash, and call forth a small manifestation of the Rubbish. It looks up at me and whimpers, "They make me hurt."

"Hurt? How?"

"Too much square. Everything precise. No room for tumbling."

I nod. "They seem to be particularly haunted by it."

"No, no," the small Rubbish insists. "They *make* the square."

"Eh?" That catches me off guard.

"You talk to spirits. They make the square. It's how they talk to the world. They say 'make everything with edges' and everything falls into place because they push it around."

"Hurm." This isn't the first time I've dealt with people who didn't know their own power, but I'm not sure I want to take the Rubbish's word for it all by itself. Time for some investigation by other means. And then, if it checks out, figuring out what I can possibly do about it.

## WILLIAM

I'm tired. My eyeballs feel like they're going to fall out of my head. Our good buddies over in the life sciences have anti-fatigue treatments better than anything most people dream of, but they've still got their limits. I've spent the last two weeks driving all over northwest Bosnia and beyond, including two crossings into Serbia, and finding one hematovore stronghold after another just empty. What on *earth* has happened to the bloodsuckers?

Sometimes Terry tags along with me. I notice that he stays disgustingly fresh and alert, and when I ask about it, he says only that he's forgotten about getting tired. He creeps me out, and he's damn well aware of it. I still haven't decided what to do about it.

We talk as we go, about this and that and the other. Mixed in with everything else, he keeps throwing in pitches for whatever this movement of great negation he's joined is. As a scientist, I know better than to accept the mystical claptrap at face value. I also know that the world is far stranger than we let most people suspect, and so it's quite possible that his mentor has stumbled onto something genuine. After all, people managed to make napalm and dynamite without quantum theory, and Greek fire and gunpowder without systematic, scientific chemistry at all. The universe doesn't stop working as it does just because you're too ignorant to realize how dangerous a game you're playing.

It's the absence of survivors that's really getting to me at this point. The hematovores didn't just go away themselves. They took their lackeys

with them, too, all the retainers who've been partially infected and for that matter the ones who've been preyed upon by the psionic talents some hematovores demonstrate. Everyone who's been directly affected by the infected blood is gone. We find some untainted minions to question, but they don't have much to say, and nothing that we couldn't have worked out: the same night, they all went to their usual appointments and found their masters gone. The disappearances apparently happened at the same time, or at least within a window of opportunity no more than twelve hours wide. Which helps as far as it goes, but these guys don't really know anything relevant.

I do tag a few for the follow-up team to interrogate, naturally. They'll have things to say about pre-disappearance operations that will help with later analysis, and given the prevailing chaos, we can probably just whisk them off for full-bore electrochemical interrogation and not have anyone worry about it. But that'll take time, and for now I'm the only guy on the spot. Radio and chemical markers will guide the others later.

Meanwhile, there's Terry and his spiel to deal with.

"Look," I say for the sixth or sixtieth time, "you're talking bullshit, and you know it. The very fact that you're talking to me and I'm understanding you proves my point. The kind of absolute freedom you're talking about never actually exists. Time and space impose constraints, and every action makes other once-possible actions impossible. If you wanted to talk to me about increasing the

bounds of possible, then I'd listen. That's what we're all about, really. But you can't talk to me about complete freedom and have me think of you as anything but a prat who isn't bothering to check his own assumptions." Terry keeps quiet at that.

We're not actually on a road at the moment. I'm following a set of tracks up a fairly smooth, dry stream bed somewhere southeast of Gradacac, looking for a cliffside hideout the last bunch of lackeys told me about, just before I ran them down. Damn fools thought they'd lure me into a false sense of confidence with useful information, then gun me down and take my body as a trophy to their absent master, or absent mistress as the case may be. I recognized the ploy about three sentences into our conversation. Three tons of van. A hundred forty kilos of Bosnian farmer. Sir Isaac Newton says I win when I put my van up against the farmer, and sure enough, I did. There are times when a repeatable universe is a great comfort.

I glance over at him, wince as another long sharp rock takes its turn pounding on the transmission, and keep up my verbal barrage. "So given that you're continuing to exist in a consistent manner, to use comprehensible language, and all the rest, I see that you are not anything like completely dedicated to what you're trying to sell me. That makes you either hypocritical or stupid, or maybe both. It also means you think I'm stupid enough to fall for it or greedy enough not to be bothered by it, and that just pisses me off. I never was a moron, and I'll thank you not to start treating me like one now.

Tell me what you really want, or just get the hell of my life and let me get on with things."

That's when the repeatable universe goes away. Fuck my hubris, I think momentarily. It begins with Terry himself. His body starts folding in and out on itself... at first it's something I can grasp, at least a little. There is a very large but finite number of three-dimensional forms that any complex organic molecule can take on—if you think of throwing a piece of string with a few rigid stretches into the air and studying the shape it takes on falling down, you've got the idea. I recognize a few of the bulges that appear and disappear beneath his skin from reviewing Union bioweapon data. There are chemicals that can throw all the proteins of a particular kind that they can reach into one or another of their many possible forms. This also locks up metabolic processes that depend on protein refolding, so it kills the subject. I don't think Terry's dying—more's the pity. And soon the changes are well beyond the boundaries of what I think biochemistry will allow.

The plague of changes spreads outward from him, taking the van out of my control. Every possible type of metal fatigue and then some strikes at once, and the damn thing just plain shakes apart. The ground I land on, as I sprawl out of my wheelchair, trembles too, and flashes through muddy and dry and icy and hot and just plain strange. After that I can't really see much, because the air isn't reliably passing along photons. I wonder why my own body is remaining constant. I suspect that Terry

has something else in store for me. Can't say I'm looking forward to it.

I hear his voice in the midst of the sensory chaos. I can't see anything but random flashes in my optic nerves like pre-migraine sparkles, and I can't hear anything but a static-filled roar. But his voice comes through it all clearly. "Bill. Bill, Bill, Bill. Who says I accepted any of that *permanently*? That was just to talk to you. Enough talk now, though."

The static gradually ebbs, but for some reason I don't find empty void all that much better. Terry described his first encounter with it as "black." Seeing or rather not seeing it for myself, I realize that that was sloppy. It's the absence of sensation, like the blind spot engulfing everything else. I retain awareness of what's inside my skin, and of nothing else. Except for when he speaks. "Well, fuck you, Bill. Why are you still hanging together like that?"

I don't exactly speak: when I open my mouth, I get that absence-of-sensation in my mouth, and there's nothing for my lungs to get purchase on. I do manage to cast my thoughts out into whatever there may be around me. "Clean living."

"Asshole." The emotion is draining out of Terry's voice, very much to my lack of surprise. If he's been spending any time here, then he's probably much further detached from human norms even than I'd guessed. "You've got something going for you that none of my other victims did. Dunno what it is. It's like a fucking wall right around your essence. But it's okay. I can keep you here until it wears away too, and then scoop you out just like the rest. I still win, asshole."

Honestly, unless I can manage to change the terms of our interaction, he's right. I've been given some of the best training in psychological discipline the Union can provide, and part of that was instruction in what training won't help with. Everyone is finite. Everyone breaks. Give me enough of this, and I will go mad, or beg to accept the source of his power as my own new boss, or do something else idiotic. I start thinking about my options. Hard.

## MING

When Qin Shihuangdi, the first man to rule all of what we now think of as China, died, he went into the afterlife with some of the most elaborate preparations for death a ruler has ever had. He had always been obsessed with death and immortality, and while he didn't get to be immortal among the living, his soul descended into the yin realms with whole armies and his entire palace enchanted for the trip. It didn't take him long to turn all of the Yellow Springs, our people's part of the underworld, into his new empire. For the next two thousand years and then some, he ruled it all, until the great storm shattered his forces and cut off each piece of the empire from all the rest.

I am making my way along the grand road to his palace. Here there is no alternative route, unless I were to try flying, and that's an art I've never mastered in any realm. South of the modern city of Xi'an, the hills sink down into a valley that descends more and more steeply, down and down and down past the skin of the world. Even the pale light

that characterizes the yin realms close to mortal existence fades into the dark of a cloudy moonless night. There is but one path, long ago smoothed and paved with stones made from alchemically forged souls. I've never been here before, but I've seen representations of it in paintings and sculptures, since the Emperor retained in death his fondness for public art that would remind his subjects of the glories he'd made. The valley itself fades away somewhere above and behind me, and now the road descends through the first layer of the vast void beneath the world. If I were to step off here, I could fall for years, if I didn't get caught in the storms, until I finally rammed into the black stone labyrinth that is the purest expression of yin.

To my surprise and relief, the wind that carries the voices of my slain loved ones fades along with the valley. I expected it to follow me and perhaps even intensify. The Wu Keng seem not to have suspected that I might come here. If I am particularly lucky, I might even manage to use the maps and guides within the palace to take me back to Xinjiang while skipping much of the intervening space. I expect to find the palace largely abandoned for simple want of resources—no more tributaries providing the spiritual equivalent of raw materials—but it should either still be inhabited by forces I can bargain with, or be in a condition such that I can exploit what remains.

I turn the next corner in the grand road and realize I'll have to change my plans. It looks like a bomb went off in the palace. Several bombs, rather, because the whole complex, spread across multiple

square kilometers, lies in ruins. The jade roofs and jeweled halls lie open to the raw fury of the maelstrom, and obviously have done so for years. The destruction isn't just from the storm, though. There's been more purposeful attack on the structures' integrity. Gates haven't just been broken down; they've been broken *apart* and scattered. The sculptures I can see from here have all been deliberately defaced. Holes have been cut into the foundations, letting the chill winds from deepest yin blow through without interruption. Someone or something worked very hard on this. Given the number of enemies the Emperor amassed in his long rule, I could spend weeks trying to guess which of them perpetrated all of this.

Fatigue catches up with me and I sob wet ectoplasmic tears. I have always hoped, somewhere I seldom acknowledged it, that one day the palace might become the capital of a better state of the dead. It's the same hope, really, that so many of us vest in the decision of the living government to use the Forbidden City: it testifies to the transformation of tyranny into justice. Even when the practice is not yet anywhere close to perfect, we can look at the physical home of the state and think to ourselves, "Someday the rulers will be worthy of the rituals and aspirations vested in this place." So with the lands of the dead, because ghosts need just as much wise government just as much as the living, so that they can pursue their individual duties and fulfill their obligations to each other and to their still-breathing descendants. But now all that is in ruins. There is nothing here to redeem, only to bury.

My tears don't altogether spoil my alertness. Something moves on the road, faster than I did and less noisily. It's like a black shadow drifting along against the wind. Black shadow. I remember the thing that struck not long after I left Beijing. Has one of my stalkers found me?

Hiding is not an option. The ruins are too dangerous: anyone willing to wreak that much damage must have taken the possibility of later exploration or restoration into account. The void is not an option. I can only face whatever comes. I stand up, dry my tears as best I can, and concentrate on remembering everything the Wu Keng taught me about self-defense.

Something pale flaps around the shadow. Gradually I realize that it's the skin of that old man who tried to claim me himself, and any uncertainty I may have felt about the shadow's identity evaporates. I wish I knew more about what it was, since "angry hungry ghost" still leaves a great deal unknown, but the basics are clear. I concentrate on drawing on the new yang power within me, reinforcing my sense of self and the definition of my ghostly form. In a moment the shadow stands on the last landing of the imperial road and has drawn itself up into its full demon warrior form, swords at the ready.

Feeling that I have nothing to lose, I open our exchange. "Begone. You have no authority in this place or over me. You are none of my ancestors, for I honor the traditional rites and know who receives my bounty. You are no servant of the Emperor or the great hierarchy, for you display none of the

blessed jade marks of office. You are an opportunist, and you owe it to whatever scrap of virtue you may still possess to depart as quickly as possible. Take your foul trophy with you and contemplate how much worse you have made your standing in the eyes in heaven."

The thing's voice emerges with a deep bass rumble. "Heaven granted me relief from hell itself. You are the one who profanes by your very existence. You are of the lightning people, with power heaven intended only for its anointed heirs. You stumbled onto it by luck or theft and have never had the prudence to give it up, let alone the temperance to let it pass from you. Now you carry a double portion of heaven's power, and are doubly at fault. I come to set the power free and end your blasphemy." The black swords strike sparks against the jade road as it makes ceremonial flourishes intended to intimidate me. And indeed I am fairly intimidated.

I brace myself for a lengthy fight, or at least a lengthy skirmish and pursuit, but it doesn't go that way at all. I adopt a simple, flexible defensive posture. The hungry ghost lunges forward, and the swords fall, one, two, three. I feel an intense agony, and then I am aware of my consciousness drawing in on itself. I cannot see my ghost-body, but I can feel it cut off from my essential awareness. The fourth sword falls, and I feel even my thoughts cut one from another. That stroke must have passed straight into my mind.

I die.

## WILLIAM

Naturally I have no way of telling how long I spend in this barely existing state. Terry stops talking to me, and after that there's only internal phenomena, which I know better than to trust in an environment that's being heavily manipulated. Part of me really hopes that this is all a good complex simulation being fed to me by routine electrochemical stimulation, with my body stored in some Bosnian barn or anti-Technocratic installation just about anywhere. The rest of me knows that's a form of escapism, a luxury I can't afford right now. I don't begin to understand what Terry is doing or how he's doing it, but he is doing it and I have to deal with it: I have to find a way to do something he hasn't prepared for.

The Technocratic Union inherited a lot of good ideas from its predecessor organization, the Order of Reason. One of them was a set of refinements to the medieval notion of the memory palace, a mnemonic scheme for associating memories with a real or imagined structure. This alcove holds memories of meals, for instance, and this niche holds the dinner memories and that pedestal next to it holds the memories of ceremonial banquets, and so on. I spend some time (what time? who knows?) organizing all my memories associated with Terry, and then more time searching for any possibly relevant information. Here it is, at last, in the form of a lecture given to Ragnarok members as part of our preparation for millennial madness, about "re-chromed" old ideas souped up for Y2K panic possibilities.

The lecturer was one of the ugliest women I've ever known, with an amazingly sexy speaking voice. She described the cults devoted to entities with names like "Lords of the Outer Dark," with a great digression about just how much harm that young fool H.P. Lovecraft did in attracting would-be cosmic nihilist magicians to a bundle of ideas just screwy enough to work sometimes, what with psionic triggers and psycho-noetic resonance effects. Terry hadn't had any interest in entities of the ultimate void back when we were both Adepts, but then people do change. What he's talking about is a close enough match that my threat assessment programs would put it at or near the top of the list. I decide to assume that it's true.

Developing a threat response on the basis of that admittedly contingent assessment, I recall that worshippers of void gods imagine themselves making or inhabiting vast labyrinths in extra-dimensional realms. Their language is bullshit, of course, but there are a number of ways that they can have experiences that they can interpret that way without being any stupider than they have to be to worship void gods in the first place, starting with transverse passages through folded dimensions and getting esoteric from there. I should be able to move myself as a bundle of neural activity even if I've been separated from my usual physical form, and interact with whatever barriers there may be to this anti-space....

Slowly I develop a suitable awareness, drawing on yoga and trauma medicine in equal measure. Suddenly it all clicks and I can tumble and stretch.

With more effort, I can move forward in a rather tricky set of oscillations. Then there's a thud, or its neurological equivalent. Here's a wall. I spread all my limbs against it to find an opening, and eventually do. Curl and oscillate, run into another. Do it again. If Terry comes by, he'll notice this immediately. I decide not to let myself think about that right now.

Without warning, I'm at the end of it. I notice this because all my senses come back at once. It's dark and cold and smells of rot, but all of that is much more enjoyable than not being able to sense anything. As I gain back my tangible self, I fall to the ground, since my legs are useless, but that's okay—I can manage to deal with that, too. I see that I'm resting on a ledge overlooking a huge shaft, miles wide, made of some veined rock that's hard to look at, a tangle of red and black and what I suspect are ultraviolet hues at the limits of my perception. I look up and see a sky larger than any possible on earth, possibly larger than any that can exist in my normal continuum. It goes on a *long* way, full of lightning-ridden storm clouds and things hard to understand. Upside-down oceans? Floating mountains? Winged dust? Something flashing up and down beyond the speed of light? I don't know.

I look down in hopes of further answers. That proves unwise. Down there is something that sucks, pulling out all the energy stored in my mind and body. I'm aware of chilling, of freezing up, of crumbling. My thoughts flow out and down along with scraps of skin and tissue, too. My memory palace

falls apart, swept away in a sort of psychic gale. Bit by bit, all of me falls into the deepest void.

I die.

## ROBERT

The third day of unwanted order is much worse. The synchronization lasts for *hours* this time, and it takes substantial effort on my part to avoid being swept up by it. The Rubbishes can't manifest at all while it lasts: it's just too orderly for anything like my totem. I want to go hunt down Mike and Louie and make them aware of their responsibility, but I decide to wait for a while. I take this wave of synchronization literally lying down, stretched out on my bed until the damn thing goes away.

Eventually, sometime around noon, it lets up enough that I can move and feel only fatigued when I try to choose my own actions, rather than utterly dazed and disoriented. My totem remains cut off from me, and I can see that the only spirits active in the building are the ones that thrive on geometric precision. It's a great day for the spirits of angles and walls, of regulated voltage and regular time. The rest of us make do as we can. I don't ask any questions of my neighbors; I just listen to their conversations, and it's clear that none of them is consciously aware of more than a general uneasiness. They speculate about tornado weather, sewer leaks, and other mundane explanations. For the time being I let them do it.

I ask around about the unwitting magicians, but nobody seems to have seen them since the

morning. They might have a job somewhere today. I sigh and head out to make a semi-random canvas of the neighborhood, just in case they're somewhere closer to home. Sure enough, as I go east, I notice the order reestablishing itself. Cars don't straggle through on yellow lights here, and nobody jaywalks. There's no litter in the streets. Nobody bumps into each other. Mostly, the affected people seem unaware of it, but I make out a few haunted looks that suggest at least a few of them are aware of acting in ways they didn't choose and can't stop. I press on through the spiritual resistance to the order-makers.

They're in a Laundromat, washing big bags full of clothes. They look pretty glazed themselves. Possibly this is the result of their own ongoing refusal to see what's up. I notice that every single machine in the place is running in perfect synchronization, and so do some of the other patrons. They'd like to leave, but they can't, not until they've washed and dried and neatly folded their clothes. Once that's done, they can't run, but they can proceed in an orderly manner out the door and to wherever it is they're going. Anytime the place seems close to emptying out, in come more locals, many of them looking somewhat bewildered, and many of the clothes they've brought are "dirty" only in the sense that they're not absolutely pristine clean. Doesn't matter; they get to their washing, too.

I finally manage to get to Mike and Louie, overcoming all the urges to throw the clothes I'm now wearing into the nearest empty machine. It's hard

going. Even the spirits of precision don't much like this, because it's not *their* precision but someone else's creation. I haven't felt so alone since my awakening apart from that ghastly time after the red eye. "Guys," I tell them as calmly as I can, "you've got a problem."

They continue folding clothes as they look up at me. "It's like I told you," Louie says with a snarl, "it's happening more and more, man. Everywhere we go."

"That's just it," I answer with a nod. "Everywhere *you and Mike* go. It's not the world at large, guys, it's you."

"What do you mean?" they demand in perfect unison.

"Look, you have to know that the maids call me *el brujo*. We all know the gossip about each other, and you've been around the building a while." They nod at that, in perfect unison. "They do that because I know a few things. And I'm telling you that this unnatural order is your own doing."

"That can't be," they insist, calmly, in perfect unison. "We're the ones fighting against it. We tell everyone about how they have to free themselves. We fight the good fight ourselves. We throw the monkey wrenches and get the flash crowd going. This is what we hate."

"Still." I think about how to continue. "It's like junkies, in a way," I try to explain. "Maybe you like the rush of newly made chaos so much that you make that much more order to overthrow. Maybe it's basic self-loathing at work, like you don't feel worthy of enjoying freedom. I don't have to know

all the details right now, not when the starting place is just for you to recognize that I might be right."

"I'm sorry, Robert," they tell me, in perfect unison, "but there's just no way. And since you keep persisting in this, we have to figure that you're part of the problem. We don't think we need to hear any more from you." Then they turn back to their laundry.

"I..." That's as far as I get. I've felt a lot of pain in my time, but this is the worst ever. It's physical, mental and spiritual all at once. Unseen weights push at my skeleton to make it precisely the average height for a man my age, and unseen hands pull my skin out to the volume typical for a man my age, since I'm a little taller and a little skinnier than the norm. It's far worse in my soul, though. Memories catch on fire... and the heat I feel across the top of my head suggests that that may not be just a metaphor. My awareness of the spirit world dims, and flashes in and out like a strobe light. My pulse normally runs fast, since like most shamans I'm putting more stress on my body than most folks. Now it's forcibly slowed to the average. The shocks of repeated stoppage of excess beats leave me so dizzy I'd like to fall over, but I can't because of the twisting that my skeleton is trying to do.

I die.

## DANTE

The triune soul looms in front of me again, forcing its way into the matrix I've been considering. I see at once that it's mortally wounded, each of its

facets dying in some nasty way. It's at once dying of too much order, too much chaos, and the disorderly mix of the two. Typical. These hybrids that exist as emergent properties of individual souls tend toward that sort of ironic "let's cover all the bases" statement.

I set my other work aside for this particular experience and wrap my arms around the bleeding soul. I probe it directly and conceptually for signs of wounding, performing an impromptu triage. The attacks are very deep in each of the people expressed here, with assaults on their identities as well as their physical and astral forms. That makes it harder. I've helped assaulted souls before by just taking the spiritual component out of the attack zone and into a physical host removed in time or space. But trying to move these now would be like dragging around someone with a broken back: it'd make matters that much worse.

In fact, by myself I can't think of anything I can actually do to help these people. With that realization, I find myself surrounded by a crowd of future versions of myself. We've been known to have conferences this way to work on particularly thorny problems, but this time they don't stay to talk. They just pop in, make sure I notice them, and pop out. They do this in waves, coming in over a stretch of what I'd think of in linear time as maybe thirty seconds and out again about as fast. Then a minute goes by and they do it again. And again. I go from holding the injured soul in a near-empty pocket of space to being surrounded by my own soul writ trans-temporally and back... and the clue

strikes me. I must be on the right track, since there aren't any more of those self-visitation waves.

For most of us, when your soul is split apart, that's it. Whether it's the normal, unawakened human soul or the awakened version with its attached oversoul, there's just so much of it to go around, and it *will* break if you push it wrong. But the members of this triad, they've all got a second oversoul. It's what attracted hostile attention to each of them. And it can save them, if I can do this right.

There's no point in my going into too many details of the surgery itself. There aren't words for it. I have to construct a whole set of maps showing me the current flow of dependencies between the divided souls and the body wrapped around each, and then use those to redraw the connections themselves, then update the maps, and bind the whole thing together in a quick-setting semiotic cement. It's unlike anything I've done before, and would leave most magicians who glory in their symbolic power gasping for breath. Certainly I'm awfully tired by the time I'm done.

The key thing is that it works. I've redirected all the damage to self for each soul to the new oversoul I helped steer them toward not so long ago. Tough break for the oversoul, but then it's a harsh universe, and the ease of the final steps tells me that I'm working in accordance with these oversouls' innate meanings even though I don't feel altogether happy about it. When that's done I can break off the damage-carrying entities and give them a gaudy, flashy version of the triune soul's true

names. Nearly true names, as it were—merchandising names, perhaps. The hostile forces around each component soul go to work on that while I carry off the real trine to safety and healing. At first we drift through ethereal gulfs, but then I think of the right place to drop them, and do.

Now back to my other work.

## ROBERT

When you experience the destruction of your soul, you usually don't expect to experience much of anything else after that. After that terrible pain in New York at the hands of those unwitting magicians, I feel a timeless moment of being at once healed and taken outside myself. I have the flickering experience of some European war zone and of rural China. Past lives, perhaps? Recollections of something in the memories of spirits I've healed over the years? Something of the sort, I expect, and in any event, the experience doesn't last long enough for me to get many details.

The next thing I'm clearly aware of is standing on a brown swath of dead grass, almost entirely buried in sand. Ahead of me is something like the daydreams of a medieval castle, stone soaring up in delicate spires and massive walls, stretching out of sight in every direction. Behind me, I see as I turn around, is a massive sandstorm held at bay by forces I don't yet recognize. The sky overhead is a pale blue, with a few very thin white clouds high above.

As I stand, I'm immediately aware of being significantly lighter than I should be. At first I wonder

if I might be stronger than usual after that way-way-way-too-near-death experience, until I notice the dust I brushed off my pants settling much more slowly than usual. Reduced gravity, then, and presumably (since I'm breathing well, not freezing or baking, and otherwise enjoying the blessings of a habitable environment) the Umbral manifestation of one of the other planets. Sand. Dust. Likely Mars. This place could easily be the trapped remains of the great multi-Tradition chantry of Doissetep, which nobody's been able to enter since a catastrophic surge in the sphere of Forces cut it off back in 1999. I hope I'm not trapped in here with it.

"Hello, anyone," I call out. "I am a stranger brought to your step by unknown means. I seek aid and information, for which I can trade honorable service."

## MING XIAN

The terrible pain of death outside the Emperor's palace gives way to a blurred sense of travel in someone else's care (and fleeting glimpses of far, troubled lands) and then to a sudden stillness. I am seated on a worn stone bench just outside some immense palace I don't recognize, looking at a frozen sand-storm just a few paces ahead. I get up and feel unexpectedly light. This must be some magician's artificial realm, carved out of the vast spaces beyond the material world for some esoteric purpose or another, and I must proceed with extra care until I understand what's going on.

I notice that my clothes are as they were before that last encounter, worn but clean, and I find

no marks of injury on myself apart from the scars I've had for years. I have not changed in apparent age, nor in physical sex. I seem to have an altogether human anatomy and what feels like my own soul without other baggage in here. These are not things to take for granted: anyone powerful enough to take me more or less directly from the depths of the underworld to wherever this is, high above in middling reaches of the Umbra, is powerful enough to rewrite me inside and out, if he so chooses. He has apparently not chosen to do anything but restore me to my previous condition.

That concerns me. Great generosity is rare among the mighty. I worry that I will be expected to discharge an obligation in return for all this restoration, whether I would have chosen it for myself or not. The forced "gift" is a thing found in almost every human culture there ever was. I've been on my guard from the moment I woke up, but now I'm doubly so.

The gate next to me seems not to have been opened for quite some time, at least to judge by the drifts of sand I have to scoop away before the door will open. The buildings within are all in advanced stages of decay, much like the Emperor's palace was. I hear an occasional soft whisper from somewhere close, and a distant shout that I can't quite make out.

## WILLIAM

It's not so much that I feel my trip down into the deeper void reversed, precisely, as that it seems undone. Interrupted. I feel suddenly reintegrated

somewhere else, someplace I don't linger long enough to get any sense of. It might be one of those annoying space-time bridging points, to judge from the fleeting impressions I get of New York and some agricultural land in the midst of high mountains. All the damage done to me is instantly undone as well. Then, without any transition I'm aware of, I'm standing on what looks like someone's B-movie version of Mars.

Standing. It takes a moment to sink in. I am *standing*, on two working legs. That was a very thorough patch-up job indeed. I mutter in what I know isn't a very good Peter Sellers voice, "Mein Führer, I can fucking walk."

The gravity feels about right, good and springy. The sky isn't too bad, either. At least whoever's responsible for this set is aware of what scientists have known for forty years now about the Martian sky not being all red and weird. But this thing in front of me... well, conceivably someone's making a movie of that Ray Bradbury story with a robotic version of the House of Usher on Mars. Except this would be Camelot on Mars, or something like that. It's fucking huge, running off well beyond the shortened horizon. Pity it's all in ruins; I'd like to at least study it some more.

Opposite the castle set is something very impressive: a full-bore sandstorm, held in place a few dozen paces outside the outer walls of the ruins. That takes a lot of power. Of course, so does maintaining a breathable atmosphere on a world with about a sixth of the gravity that usually takes. Suddenly I get an unpleasant suspicion. I know that

there is a Union presence on Mars, but I don't know anything much about it. I've always assumed it was just another research station. I also know that the Union's beloved Inner Circle of highest leaders includes a fair number of really old guys (and maybe some really old gals), who have spent decades being surrounded by underlings willing to tell them that whatever they're interested in must be really right and good for the world. If one of them decided, "Hey, the Union would greatly benefit by having a ruined castle on Mars," just who would tell him, "Sorry, sir, that's an unwise use of our resources," really?

It's been quite a long time since I last walked, and that was under much less freaky circumstances than this. So I go slowly and carefully, making damn sure that I'm within easy reach of something to lean on in case I fall over. There's a gusting breeze that makes sounds too much like human voices for comfort. And off in the distance, it sounds like someone's shouting. I debate whether to go toward or away from that.

## ROBERT

I've never been here before—shamans seldom spend much time in the artificial domains that other magicians construct for themselves out of the raw fabric of the spirit worlds—but I've heard stories about it. I awakened to my power not very long before Doissetep was destroyed, and many of the magicians I spoke with in my early wanderings had stories to tell about this or that conference there, the mentor who learned something valuable in the

labs perched on the very brink of the realm where all fundamental forces originate, and so on. I'm still not entirely clear on what happened to it: something apparently made a surge within the, er, force of Forces so to speak, and erupted through all its connections to the material world. The technomagical Digital Web crashed like an overloaded power grid, which is exactly what it was, and there were explosions wherever sites had been consecrated to the flow and control of force. And all within Doissetep were trapped, cut off from the rest of the universe as their realm lost all its sustaining vitality.

Which makes me wonder just how I got here from that nasty death in New York. Someone's intervening in my affairs, and that makes me nervous. I wish my totem were here. I don't feel any barriers when I call out to him; it's just that he's very far away. "Hello!" I call out, without adding, "What the hell is going on here, anyway?"

Even in ruins, it's an impressive place. Here were libraries. Not just collections of books, either, since magic comes in all kinds of peculiar forms. I see shelves to hold polished river stones of geomantic significance, and gardens of trees cultivated so that the wind in their branches would make significant harmonics, and panes of glass each glazed to let a single color through, hung from beams overhead so as to make a sort of reverse prism effect. There's more here than I can even guess at; I only know those galleries for what they are because I'd been told. The boundary with the Forces realm wasn't any simple thing in three-dimensional space, of course. Here are wells and windows and lofts all

arranged for studying one or a few selected forces in isolation, and two great amphitheaters, which I understand could hold the combined power of undifferentiated everything-force in sufficient quantity for close study.

Around all the tools of study, I see residences, dining facilities and everything needed to fix the meals several dozen magicians could eat, places for games and plays and other distractions from work, and many places too ruined or obscure for me to even guess sensibly at their purpose. The red sand covers almost everything that isn't really well screened from the winds.

The real question is... okay, that's silly. There are a lot of questions that matter a great deal to me right now. One of the most important ones is, Why am I here now? There can be no doubt that someone's messing with my affairs. Since I prefer living to being dead, I can't entirely complain, but I distrust anyone capable of and willing to take such drastic action without explanation. I feel like I'm being set up. I must proceed with caution here. Almost anything can be a trap.

On the other hand, I'm also willing to maintain my usual personality. If I'm being spared for a reason, I can at least hope that it's because of what I am, rather than (or at least in addition to) what I can be made to do. I continue calling out as I walk. Sometimes I think I hear others moving in these ruins, though when I get close, I never see anything but the wind and the slightest traces of ghosts.

## MING XIAN

Above all, I wonder just what it is I'm doing here. I ought (if that word means anything) to have perished deep in the underworld, the mindless shards of my soul enriching the storms. Someone with great power and widespread awareness intervened. I appreciate being alive, but in my experience, gifts like this come at a price, and I would very much like to know what it is.

A certain childlike part of me wishes to believe that Heaven and its ministers have reached down to show me special favor in this moment of need. Upon consideration, I find that unlikely, to put it mildly. But who, then? The Wu Keng wouldn't do it; they'd help my would-be destroyer. My ancestors couldn't, I think, rescue me from that attack, and if they could, they wouldn't bring me here as opposed to some place like a personal or familial home. The list goes on, always foundering on power and usually on motive as well. I know that there are communities of the enlightened around the world, with territorial and other factions and complex struggles between them, but I've never bothered to learn the details.

Whatever this place is, it's filled with ghosts. Some of them can make fairly coherent bodies for themselves out of the ambient power that lingers on after whatever destroyed it all. Others must grasp for fleeting concentrations of power borne on the winds and relics they stir up as the breezes pass. Still others can barely manage even that, and I can only sense their presence by the faintest of whispers. As far as I can tell, they're all white, Europeans

or Americans, and all from sometime in the recent past.

Then I turn a corner and see an apparently living man ahead of me. He's young, at least a decade younger than me, and he has the same combination of physical perfection and deep weariness that I feel myself. "Hello," I say with much diffidence, in the best English I can muster.

## ROBERT

I emerge from the ruins of a small building, perhaps a warehouse of some kind, to see a middle-aged Chinese woman standing in the midst of an open courtyard. She radiates a peculiar combination of strength and exhaustion, her aura shining through the nondescript denim blouse and trousers she wears. It looks like she's been traveling long and hard. I wonder what road might have brought her here, and then it occurs to me to wonder whether she may have been yanked here through some experience like my own mystery trip.

"Hello," she says in a clear though accented Chinese.

"Hello," I say back. "My name is Robert Blanclege. I'm a stranger here. I come from New York, in the United States. To the best of my knowledge, this is the chantry of Doissetep, in the spirit realm of the planet Mars."

She looks confused for a moment, then smiles. "I didn't actually suspect that in particular, but I suspected something that strange. I am Ming Xian, an employee of the Office of Family Planning and

a practitioner of the ancestral rites. I was somewhere else and then found myself here, rather suddenly."

"Me too." I think about playing it coy, but decide not. "Ms. Ming," I add, "I don't begin to have a clue what's going on here. I'm a shaman, a spirit dancer. This was a place for hermetics and the practitioners of highly organized approaches to willworking. I don't feel I belong here, and I don't know why I'm here now. The last thing I remember is a terrible attack from unwitting willworkers who were making their own torment and fought me when I tried to show them the truth. I thought they'd killed me, and then suddenly I was here."

She thinks about that. "The same for me, Mr...." She wrestles with my name for a moment, fails, and moves on. "I was fighting a hungry ghost, what you would call a vampire, and it destroyed me, or would have. Then I was here."

"Did you deal much with hermetics?" I'm not sure if she'll know the term, and think how I might explain it.

"No," she says. "We have them in China, of course, but their schools never mingled with the ones I studied in, and since my... graduation... I have been solitary." She pauses again. "Not in the company of other magicians, I mean."

"Forgive me if I offend with an ignorant question," I say with some trepidation, "but if you have no ties here personally, perhaps one of your ancestors did? A mentor? Someone with authority over you, as you define authority?"

She shakes her head. "No. My teachers and I became estranged, and if they were to take me, it

would be to a prison. Few of my ancestors had any talent for the supernatural, and those few were all shamans. Your rural cousins," she adds with a quick smile.

"Well, then." I gesture. "I've been looking around in hopes of finding something useful. Would you like to join me? Perhaps together we can understand more quickly."

"Thank you, that would be very nice." Together we look around at the routes we haven't taken yet.

## WILLIAMI

The first rule of parapsychology is that it all sucks. The ability to sterilize an era of all lingering psionic traces, neurologically sensitive quantum distortions, and all the rest of that is one of the basic features of the good life, right up there with indoor plumbing and steak sauce. I really, really hate wandering around in the midst of crap that the superstitious would interpret as ghosts.

Wandering itself is pretty nice. I could get used to having legs again. I try not to, because I'm sure that whoever's responsible is going to show up with the bill in hand, and when I refuse to pay it (as of course I will), they'll take their nice legs back. I don't even have a full set of prosthetics with me, just the emergency braces that would let me hobble a few steps and then crawl reasonably productively. I make the most of the occasion while it lasts, enjoying the ability to stretch up on tiptoes, to jump and kick.

The man shouting off in the distance quiets down and falls into conversation with someone else,

whose voice is soft enough that I can't make out details. Dammit, what I could do with even one surveillance drone. Even a handful of directional mikes and the most basic processing gear. I feel so helpless without my tools, and compensate as best I can with what I hope is a confident demeanor. I just wish I knew a lot more about this all.

I turn a corner, and nearly run into a man waiting for me. He's Middle Eastern, to judge from the darkness of his skin and the shape of his features. Handsome as hell, too, and he stands with immense confidence, wearing what looks like old-fashioned Eskimo or other arctic gear. I'm very, very bothered that I didn't even hear him. "Are you the management?" I demand in my best manner. "I wish to register a complaint."

He smiles, revealing teeth that apparently didn't get as much dentists' love as they might have benefited from. He speaks a single sentence that I can't make out.

"Ignorance of basic English is no excuse," I snap. "Take me to the manager."

"William," he says, in the midst of more unfamiliar sounds. It's not Arabic, I don't think; I've heard that spoken by our consultants in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Persian, perhaps? Or just gibberish, I suppose.

"That's Mr. Albacastle to you. There must be someone in charge, and you are clearly not it. Hop to it, boy." That last is a calculated crack. He looks at least my age and a lot more physically experienced: his hands and sandaled feet are thickly callused and he's got the countless small scars you

see on someone who deals with thorns and other such obstacles on a regular basis. But there's nothing like bad attitude either to get results or to make me feel a little less intimidated by the whole thing.

For the briefest of moments he flickers. Some martial arts trick? Is he just an ectoplasmic manifestation? No, he's leaving solid prints on the ground and displacing air when he speaks—I can see eddies in the dust swirls that pass us by. But now he looks a lot more awake, and is his necklace pendant different? Dammit, I didn't make a thorough enough survey at first to be sure. "Hello, William," he says in fluent English. "You're early."

"Early for what?"

"Early for the complaining. That comes in a few minutes, after the wizard and the saint have their say."

"I'm so fucking glad this amuses you. Tell me what's going on, starting with why you didn't answer me at first," I go back to the overbearing style.

"Oh, that was long ago," he says quite seriously, "long before I learned English as you would speak it now. I could have given you an answer of a sort that might make sense to Chaucer, but I thought it wise to go ahead and get closer. You may thank me for that."

"Most of us think that a minute ago isn't all that long," I say. "Unless you're claiming to be a time traveler."

He makes a seesaw gesture with his right hand. "I could, but I've never thought of it that way. It's just that the path mapped for me doesn't run entirely through the boring lowlands of time. I get to hike the highlands and hidden valleys as well."

"That's the biggest bullshit I've heard since the last departmental review. Try again."

"Tell me, William—" I start to object at the familiarity, but he cuts me off. "Tell me, William, do you believe the evidence of your senses?"

"Sometimes. When it's worth my while, and I can be confident that there's no trickery."

"All right, then," he says quietly. "Your next sentence to me will be 'What the fuck?' and the one after that will be 'Here's the rest of the circus.'"

"I doubt it," I say. At least that's what I want to say. But as I start to speak, he flickers again and is suddenly covered in snow. Again, and drenched from rain. Again, and holding something strange in his arms. Is that an *emu*? "What the fuck?" I say, not really thinking about it. Then I realize that I've been tricked, and start to say something about that, when I see a woman who looks like a community theater version of Joan of Arc and a man who looks like something from one of my high school D&D games, complete with staff and little crystal ball. "Here's the rest of the circus," I quip.

"There," he says with great satisfaction.

"That's good choreography," I admit, "but it's not prophecy."

The old man would look a bit like an advertising version of Santa Claus if he had any hint of humor in his manner. He doesn't; he looks like someone carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. I can't be all that sure he's really so old, either; I know what a lot of stressful responsibility can do to a man. I just wish his costume didn't look so much like he wandered out of a Renaissance fair

or something like that. I can't take a man in a bathrobe very seriously anyplace but the bathroom.

When he speaks, though, it's with a voice of command that I can only envy. This guy could move mountains, I think, if he really wanted to. "William, son of Philip, you are a fool. A very fortunate and blessed fool, but a fool nonetheless. Do not insult Magister Salonikas with your ignorance."

Bluster won't get me anywhere with this one, I can tell, so I settle for my customary arrogance and bitterness. "I make it a practice to insult anyone who calls himself magister, and I've got better things to do than sit around being the object of other people's efforts at being clever."

"Better things?" he says with some amusement. "Such as dying at the hands of a colleague who sold his soul? I suppose we can put you back there, if you really want..."

"Er. No. Okay, you've got my attention." I admit. "Tell me what's going on already."

"In just a moment," he tells me like a teacher speaking to an impatient student. "We must gather the others."

"Others?"

"In just a moment," he repeats with less patience.

The woman is a fab babe, as nearly as I can tell through the monastic robes. She's got very large and bright dark eyes, and she's constantly looking around at everything with the sense of wonder. I usually don't have much use for innocence, particularly not when it's literally wide-eyed, but she makes it appealing. She opens her mouth and... does something. It's not speech. It's not regular singing, either. She makes

multiple sounds and somehow sends them off in different directions. If I were to map it out, it would look something like this:

<i>Come, speaker to spirits</i>	<i>Come, speaker to ancestors</i>
<i>Hear the voice of the Spirit</i>	<i>Hear the voice of the King</i>
<i>Come, twice guarded</i>	<i>Come, twice guarded</i>

I'm not much for classical music, but I know enough to recognize at least some of her talent. Her tones are crystal-clear and extremely precise, and she holds those final syllables an amazingly long time. I wish idly that I could get her in a lab, record her for a few months, and then dissect her to find out just what makes that effect possible.

I have a response to the old guy's last comment, but I have to wait for the nun babe to finish. Then I get back to business. "Sir, I've made a *career* of insulting people who call themselves 'Magister' or who let others call them that. I'm not about to make an exception right now. You may look impressive to the rubes, but I don't have time for this. So get on to the point."

The old guy growls, but the younger man raises his hand. "Hold a moment, Porthos."

Now there's a name I know from my studies back in the old days. "Porthos Fitz-Empress?"

The old guy nods. "Porthos Fitz-Empress, Hermes bani Flambeau..."

I interrupt him. "Yeah, yeah. The thing is, you look awfully alive for someone who's supposed to have gone up in smoke along with the rest of this

place." I wave a hand around. "If it really is Doissetep, but I'll give you the assumption there."

Very much to my surprise, he looks positively wistful for a second. "'Awfully alive.' It would be pleasant if you were correct." That confuses me, and I look him up and down while he continues. He seems pretty tangible to me: he's making marks in the sand, the breeze goes around him, the whole deal. Meanwhile, he's back to being businesslike. "Mr. Albacastle, you are a guest here, brought here for a purpose. It's clear that you are not inclined to trust our goodwill, and indeed I'm not at all sure I would trust you if you were too willing. What I wonder is simply what it would take to persuade you that you are wrong on some of the cosmological issues on which we disagree."

"Is that a serious question?"

"Very serious," he says, and he looks it, too.

"I'm not sure," I say as I think it over, "but I can lay out some boundary conditions."

"Please do." All three of them are actually listening to me, carefully, which I find interesting but not especially comfortable.

"I've built up a new worldview twice in my adult life. The first time, I went from collegiate materialism to the techno-mysticism of the Virtual Adepts. The gang set me up with the idea that some aspects of modern science are just the re-representation of old magical insights, and vice versa, and fed the idea that the magical side of that is at least partly true. That worked for a while. Then I started exploring some more and ran into Technocratic interpretations, and slid back toward where

I'd started, with a more comprehensive data set and better analytical tools. I haven't run into anything in the last, hmm, ten or fifteen years now that clearly requires handling with anomalistics."

"Commendable," says Salonikas with a wry little smile.

"Couldn't be anything else," I tell him. "The point here is that there is no set of phenomena that would make me smack myself and say 'Holy shit! I gotta get back to rattling bones and worshipping the local pine trees!' The very best it could accomplish is making me think that I need to study it all very carefully and see whether others who share my outlook have already had any success analyzing it."

The guy who thinks he's Porthos clearly ponders that back and forth. "So no display of miracles would command your attention? No summoned demon, no alchemical transformation?"

"Nope," I say with a vigorous shake of my head. "Senses are too easily manipulated. I'm a professional sensory trickster, at least some of the time. The whole point of cybernetics and external prosthetics is to feed the brain input it wouldn't normally get. Stagecraft is probably as old as big flat rocks that people could stand on to get attention. And even though there's no fundamental validity to the sort of claptrap your lot peddle, there's enough exploitable complexity in neurology and the physiology of perception that you can seem awfully plausible without a whole lot of specialized tools I seem not to have with me at the moment."

The guy takes a stab at being tactful. That worries me: why the hell would someone who thinks he's the greatest archmage of the last couple centuries want to be nice to a mid-level operative in the employ of his worst enemies? "You certainly have a thorough skepticism."

"Not at all." Well, I'm not going to figure out his motives right now, so I may as well keep being direct. "I am not a skeptic. I'm a disbeliever. All I'm saying is that part of my disbelief is the willingness to proceed slowly to the conclusions part of an analysis. 'This is impressive-looking bullshit' is the insight of a moment; 'this is the subconscious exploitation of a cognitive pattern we can establish in primate and proto-primate species evolved for aquatic hunting' is the insight that comes much later. But just because I don't know what the end answer is, don't think that in the meantime I'm willing to believe your story."

"I see." The guy apparently does, too, or at least he understands about the use of an overall intellectual framework. Hermetics are still full of shit, but it's a comprehensible sort of shit. I have no idea what Salonikas might be into. The nun's getting obviously offended and looks like she might be ready to lecture me about the limits of intellect in the face of God's ineffable mystery. I decide to cut her off at the pass. "The ineffable can always be effed. It's just a matter of learning how."

That does indeed get the nun stirred up. "Your blindness is appalling!"

The old guy cuts her off. "Another time, Bernadette." Something about that name rattles

around in my brain, but it doesn't quite connect to anything. Must be someone in Tradition history, but I'll get the details another time.

## MING XIAN

The shaman is strange in many ways, but it's clear that we have been following parallel paths in our ways. We walk and talk, he often asking thoughtful questions that make it easy for me to draw my experiences together into a coherent pattern.

"So it was a red eye, or at least red eyes, for you too?" He asks.

"Yes," I say again, thinking back to that terrible scene with what might not have been my ancestors at all.

"Did you hear many stories of the Red Star? That might have been just a Western thing, for all I know."

"Yes, I heard a few," I say as scattered memories refresh themselves. "There were hermits who said that a new red star was sneaking through the heavens, hiding itself from most eyes down on earth while preparing some grand scheme."

"That's very much like what I heard, too. There were theories about what it was up to and where it had come from. It seems pretty clear to me that your ancestors' red eyes and my red eye were manifestations of the thing that looks like a star when it's in the sky. At first I thought that the rest of our pair of mysteries would tie into that but... maybe not." He questions me then about the black man who appeared to me before my reawakening. Gradu-

ally, as we are able to recall specific lines, we find that he said precisely the same things to us and to one other.

A fleeting thought makes me smile. He asks what it is. "I just remembered a lesson from the basic instruction in my old school. One of the reasons the Kangxi emperor rejected a 1746 petition that he set a good example for China by converting to Christianity was that a monk in the party of emissaries mentioned a medieval tale of bilocation—appearing in two places at once, that is. The emperor decided that this was contrary to the Way of human beings, for whom life must always be a singular experience, and so he rejected their entreaties despite finding much merit in the doctrines." The shaman looks a little confused. "Now here I am owing my soul and perhaps my very life to a Westerner engaging in trilocution. It's a potent lesson in humility."

He gets it. "Yes indeed." Sobriety returns after one hearty laugh. "What I'm wondering, though, is whether Dante rescued us from that second death, too."

"I... " I'm going to dismiss it, and then I think about it some more. "I suppose it could be. I have so little idea what's going on, and I dislike living in a world without rules, or even with rules that remain hidden from me."

That makes him laugh again. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to mock you or your preferences," he says as he calms down. "It's just that my whole existence is taken up in experiences where very few rules ever apply. I deal with psychology, with soul if I want to put it in a way that avoids some implication traps.

There are rules to thought, sure, but it's not like what most people would think of as laws of nature. The part of the universe I deal with is always changing its mind and making a mess."

I think of several questions I'd like to ask about that, but a woman's voice interrupts. Or is it several women's voices? Their song, in some traditional Western mode, drifts across the ruins:

<i>Come, speaker to spirits</i>	<i>Come, speaker to ancestors</i>
<i>Hear the voice of the Spirit</i>	<i>Hear the voice of the King</i>
<i>Come, twice guarded</i>	<i>Come, twice guarded</i>

The shaman and I look at each other and nod. We will seek out the singers, and continue our conversation another time.

## WILLIAM

I'm about to try provoking the nun some more when I hear footsteps somewhere nearby. The old guy glares at me and says, "Our other guests are about to arrive. Refrain from rudeness just for a moment."

Man. Talk about red flags in front of the bull. I open my mouth to say something snappy just as he makes a pair of little gestures with each hand. As my mouth opens, I feel it getting hotter and hotter in there, racing toward the temperature of an open flame. I close it, and it cools. Open it, and it warms up again. Looks like I'll be refraining from rudeness. Just for a moment.

There are two newcomers, a young American or European man and a Chinese woman older than me. I realize that they're the ones I've had glimpses of in those moments of morphic resonance entanglement, or whatever it is. I'd like to say something, but my mouth heats up again; I glance over at the old guy and see that he's in no mood to let it up. I'm pretty sure that it's some kind of induced auto-hypnosis, but damned if I can find a way to shock myself out of the rut. Sometimes this whole human nature thing just sucks.

The old guy makes a shallow bow to the new arrivals. "On behalf of the Rogue Council, I welcome you to Doissetep, and regret that we cannot show you the courtesy which our guests could once expect."

Oh *ho!* I think to myself. Every so often some group of would-be rulers of the worlds decides to get everyone stirred up, organized, disorganized, or otherwise suitably manipulated. They send out messages hither and yon until someone better disciplined and less delusional comes along to make them shut up. The most recent group of this sort has been surprisingly successful, getting messages to (as nearly as we can tell) everyone participating in what the Traditions like to call the Ascension War, as well as to a lot of would-be bystanders. The very name "Rogue Council" is something cobbled together out of recipient responses; the senders don't stick any labels on themselves and vary their methodology a lot. The only reason our analysts are confident that the group exists at all is their messages' persistent emphasis on Ascension, the

overthrow of restrictions and the like, and the persistent brilliance of their infiltration past everyone's defenses.

It's always wise to be a little cautious about this kind of thing, but I suspect that our analysts didn't spend a lot of time asking each other, "Hey, what if the Rogue Council is three old-school farts who think they're famous wizards of history, hiding out on Mars?" I hope I live to tell them what they've missed.

The new arrivals recognize the name too, I see. The man doesn't bow. Rather stiffly, he says, "Thank you for the welcome, sir. Do you mean to say that you're the ones who've stirred up so much apocalyptic fear and nonsense among those of us back on Earth?"

"No." The old guy can be impressively brief when he wants to be.

"Then is it not true that the Rogue Council is responsible for these 'ascend now or die' messages?"

"We do indeed send them, my colleagues and I, and others who aren't able to present themselves to you now."

The American looks frustrated, and I can't blame him. I'm still trying to speak, testing the old guy's ability to keep up the effect while he's busy with other things. No luck yet. "Then what is it you object to?"

"It's not nonsense," the old guy says, and he really is angry. "We are all running out of time and chances very rapidly indeed, and this is our way of trying to help as many as possible before it is too late."

The Chinese woman speaks for the first time since they arrived here. "Sir, men have predicted the end of the world since the beginning of recorded history. Some say that the first sentence ever spoken was a prophecy of the end. If you mean to tell us that you think the end is nigh, then I mean to tell you that you've joined an often honorable but always wrong throng."

## MING XIAN

I am suddenly irritated by all of this. Have we gone through death, torment, rebirth, and mystery merely to listen to hoary clichés? I can see tremendous power in all three of these, and in the fourth, who seems to be choking whenever he tries to speak. I think about the matter of innate power and study more closely. The yang power seems to have been burned out in my second death, but I know how to use the evidence of yin to give myself plenty of raw data to work with. I realize...

"Sir," I ask, "I do not generally ask personal questions about others' health and well-being without prior acquaintance, but I must know. Are you as dead as you seem to be to my inner eyes?"

That startles both Robert the shaman and the uncomfortable stranger. The old man solemnly says, "Yes. I perished in the destruction of this place. Sister Bernadette died long before. Magister Salonikas is a somewhat special case, but there is an unmarked grave for him in northern wastes down on Earth."

"Um," Robert begins, uncertain of how to proceed.

The old man delivers a long string of titles that make little sense to me, given my ignorance of (and lack of interest in) Western hermeticism. I do grasp that Porthos is his name, and proceed with that. "Magister Porthos... is that a suitable title?" He nods. "Thank you. Magister Porthos, were you and your fellow councilors involved in the mysterious aid granted to us?"

He nods again at that. "Yes, we were." I notice that he's avoiding using my name and title. He's probably ancient enough to be uncomfortable with women of power, particularly those of such tangled background as myself. I decide not to make an issue of it, and let him continue. "You three are among those chosen for an unusual blessing, one that we could not let perish without at least trying to help," he says.

"You speak of our reawakening, assisted by the man I believe Robert referred to as Dante."

"Dante Souvent, yes." The tanned younger man joins in here. "He is not strictly speaking part of the council, but we speak with him often and he shares our concerns for what's coming next. Given the opportunity to help in this way, he readily agreed to do so."

"I'm sure that we all appreciate it," I say, "but truly, we do wish to know more about what's going on."

Magister Porthos steps back two paces, and the others quickly match him. A little dust devil stirs the sand where they were and traces out a circle of nine symbols. "Do you recognize these?" he asks each of us.

I see the silenced man gasp for breath and speak at last. "Oh yeah," he says with a snarl. "That's the damn cycle of spheres the Traditions came up with as a substitute for understanding the way things actually work."

The nun—Sister Bernadette—looks angry. When she speaks, it is (to my surprise and pleasure) in a polyphonic chanting, much like the passage of song that guided Robert and me here. She sings:

<i>The words of the fool</i>	<i>In doubt there is darkness</i>	<i>There is only one world</i>
<i>Darken knowledge</i>	<i>Ask only till you find</i>	<i>There is only one truth</i>
<i>The words of the wise</i>	<i>The answer true</i>	<i>All good things come from one</i>
<i>Lighten the way</i>	<i>To arrive is better than to travel</i>	<i>All good things return to one</i>

All three strains are completely comprehensible. But then of course this isn't just talented singing, it's the power of her Way communicating the complex passions of her soul to the rest of us. The magisters nod their agreement, and Magister Porthos continues. "These are nine of the steps by which we pass from potential to achieved reality, uniting form and substance into the expression of human life and then releasing it again for the next generation."

"I thought these were symbols for the stages of magic as those of you who work with formal symbolism identify them," Robert says. He starts to list some of the more common names for each.

He doesn't get to finish. The older magister cuts him off. "And what is life but the power of magic made manifest?"

I sigh a moment at that, and notice that Robert and the stranger do as well. This, I remember, is part of why I didn't spend more time studying with the cabal of hermetics I once encountered: their dogmatism, that monastic and missionary impulse channeled into the study of magic rather than theology but if anything even more thoroughly buttressed by rampant hubris. They start by speaking about themselves, end by speaking about God, and don't change the subject in between; the pursuit of transcendence via power is deeply unappealing to those of us who appreciate the role of duty as part of authority.

He notices, and he's not at all amused. "Very well, then, if you understand this all so well, *you* bring *me* back to life." I have to admit that there's some force to that argument.

The men are a lot more confused about that part of this experience than I am. Robert decides to take the plunge. "Er, magister, if you're as dead as that, what *are* you doing here?"

"I'll explain the moment you show any inclination to keep quiet long enough for me to give a meaningful answer," Porthos snaps. Robert subsides. Porthos waits a little longer. "Thank you. Now then. These are nine of the steps by which we pass from potential to achieved reality. But it's not a complete set. At every level of the cosmos, it takes something more. In magic, we must apply the trained and enlightened will to send power through the cycle to our desired goal. In human civilization, we must apply directing organization to gather the personality archetypes together into a func-

tional society. The same principle applies to the organization of matter, vitality, the heavens, the angels and demons. There is always something more. Did that not ever strike you as curious?"

The stranger, apparently feeling brave, pipes up again. "It just struck me as one more damn reason the model sucks," he says in a conversational tone. "Nine is just too convenient a number for numerology and the other superstitious claptrap. I'm mostly impressed to hear anyone as immersed in it as you actually admit a weakness rather than try to force it all in so it looks tidy again."

"There are times," Porthos says with icy calm, "that I think it may be worth it to destroy some particularly unworthy souls and gamble on the arrival of better candidates for the end-time mission." He doesn't look directly at the stranger. That doesn't matter, though: I can see the stranger quivering in pain and sensory confusion as the archmage pushes and pulls at the harmony of forces required to keep the stranger alive. It's not quite like torture—I know from having it done to me shortly before I fled my old masters. It's more like the experience of doubt translated into physical sensation, an unreliability of the flesh. I suspect that the stranger will restrain himself for at least a little while.

Porthos resumes after that display of somewhat petty authority. "The human experience provides us with the clue as to what's missing. The capstone of the awakened will is the quality of judgment. Our capacity to assess and judge makes it possible to consider success and failure in progress toward

our chosen goals, as well as to evaluate the goals themselves. But there is nowhere in the cycle of spheres for judgment. There is no teleology, no art of final causes in it." He spreads his hands to call the dust devil back. "Or at least there wasn't. Now there is."

The wind uncovers a single bright red stone, perhaps an opal. It shines balefully in the midst of the sand-etched symbols. "This is judgment." It doesn't take any of us very long to make the connection, and he pauses a somewhat insultingly long time to let it sink in. "Telos, Judgment, is the last act of creation in a universe that is about to end. Each of you is here because you've been marked by one face or another of the tenth sphere and incorporated into its interface with the rest of existence."

## ROBERT

I feel a lot of sympathy with the stranger and his repeated cries of bullshit. This isn't how I approach the world, and it does gross injustice to the complexities of the spirit world. It's okay for shorthand when trying to compare details of specific practices with people trained in very different approaches, but it's never, so nearly as I can tell, been more than that. Except to the true believers, of course. I'm going to be annoyed if it turns out that there's more fundamental truth resting with them than I ever thought, after all.

Once Porthos said they were all dead in one sense or another, I dedicated half my attention to examining the boundaries of their souls more

closely. Sure enough, the distinctive traces of death are there, once I know to look for them. But they've been nearly overwhelmed by postmortem infusions of power from some source I don't recognize. There's something going on here and I don't feel I have the luxury of dismissing them as particularly lucky cranks. "Magister, do you identify the Red Star with this tenth sphere, then?"

"Just so. The vivid and unwholesome glare is a symbol of the fear which judgment strikes into the hearts of all who feel themselves not yet prepared for it."

"And what," I take the risk of asking, "does its rampant destructive power signify? What is it about judgment that is best reflected in the deaths of magicians selected for no apparent reason?"

Salonikas steps in while Porthos glowers. "Your question presumes too much about time," he tells me. You are marked because you will be marked, dead and returned because your future duties require you to be so. The future reaches into the past to choose those whom it must have for the sake of its own history."

"That seems very convenient," I object. "Whatever is, must be? That's the creed of tyranny, the sort of thing that your Technocratic friend here"—I wave at the stranger—"would say. It does not sit well on one who professes belief in any alternatives."

"Listen up, fuckwit," the stranger begins, but Salonikas doesn't let him get further.

"Weren't you just thinking about the importance of duty in tempering power?" Salonikas asks

me rather pointedly. "And if you think individuals may have duties, why not the heavens as well?"

"Er, yes. I didn't realize you're a mind reader, though."

"I'm not. You confirmed it, and the knowledge of that confirmation made its way back to me in time for me to use it productively." He smiles as though that all makes perfect sense. My head hurts.

"All right," I manage, "let's say that you're entirely correct about all this. What does this mean for us? What is it you think that we should do?"

"The ultimate question," Porthos says, resuming control of this little seminar. (This is more than usually cynical for me. Am I being contaminated by the Technocrat's attitude?) "But not one worth answering just yet."

"Pray, worthy magister," Xian says with about as much sarcasm as I feel (if the Technocrat is infectious, we're both susceptible to it), "what must we know first?"

Porthos looks very much like he'd like to just kill the rest of us, possibly by throwing us into that barricaded sandstorm surrounding these ruins. "First you must know the first thing, because the last thing is its logical complement." Oh no, I think, please don't give us a lecture on hermetic logic. Fortunately, he doesn't. "The cosmos began in unity, every element that we now identify with the spheres in perfect harmony and identity, and the One Soul animating it all. For reasons that we need not go into now, the One divided, and divided again, and separated out into the rather disorderly cosmos we see all around us. The advent of Judgment means

that the reunification may happen, as each thing may be assessed and restored to its proper context, whether original or a context based on the disposition of things as they now are."

We all think about that for a few minutes. "I didn't expect to be the herald of the apocalypse," I say, breaking the quiet.

Sister Bernadette makes her first contribution to the lesson.

<i>Perfection in one</i>	<i>Everything in potential</i>
<i>Harmony in two</i>	<i>The foundation achieved</i>
<i>Generation in three</i>	<i>Walls and doors, defining and welcoming</i>
<i>Opposition in many</i>	<i>Heavens and the earth</i>
<i>Disorder and death in all</i>	<i>Declare a lost message</i>

We have to think about that for a while, too.

## WILLIAM

If I thought there was any point in it, I'd make a break for it now. Whatever these wizards have cooked up, I'm very sure I don't want to be a part of it. But this is their turf. Listening *can* hurt me, but I hope to avoid at least most of that.

I also see that I'm getting somewhere with the body-language cues I use to manipulate the perceptions of the other two, Robert and Xian apparently. The wizards are part of some other culture, and they don't have much if any connection to the cultural matrices of the new millennium. The other two

outsiders do, and they're susceptible to a little covert poking and prodding. I think it might be safer to spread the load of hostile skepticism around some so that all the corrective discipline doesn't get piled onto just me.

For novelty's sake, I decide to sound reasonable for a bit. "All right," I say. "I can accept in principle the notion of transtemporal causality. The Union's had damn little success with it, but that seems to be a matter of engineering. So future states shape their own preconditions. Fine. But what does that have to do with all of this concern with judgment, for those of us who don't believe morality is a property of the universe at all?"

Salonikas pulls a coin out of his jacket and tosses it up and down. "Do you think the planet cares whether the coin believes that gravity is a property of the universe?"

"No, but that's the cheapest kind of sophistry. You simply assert that morality compares with gravity, rather making any demonstration of it."

"You would feel better with a demonstration?" He sounds very solicitous now.

"Not particularly, in light of my earlier comments about the unreliability of perception. I meant 'demonstrate' in a rhetorical sense, as I'm pretty sure you knew."

His accent gets more pronounced as he gropes for some of the technical terminology. "You have made an error in your presuppositions," he says in a lecture-hall declarative style, "with your etherealization of morality. The point of my exercise with the coin was to offer an alternative inference, that

morality is no more detached from physical essence than gravity. You cannot choose to be moral any more than you can choose to have mass. You can only choose the expression of this innate quality."

I think that the woman Xian is completely lost by this, and Robert's looking pretty confused as well. Fuck 'em. "This is..."

Salonikas interrupts me. "Porthos, Bernadette, we simply don't have the time for this. I will show them." The other wizards say simply "yes," and Salonikas seems to blur, like overlaid exposures on film. In effect, he's simultaneously reaching out to me and Robert and Xian. It's an impressive feat of transtemporal connectivity, made more so by the extent to which it must rely on fortunate truths in his sundry dogmas and other claptrap.

What follows next is a trick, I tell myself. An illusion. But it's so powerfully real. It's a different *quality* of experience, a folding across space and time. I realize with an unhappy shock that the ripples blowing across my skin and the patterns of twisting stars rushing all around us define some of the basic catastrophe surfaces, the mathematical models for systems undergoing sudden and discontinuous change. Would some Greek or Persian with a taste for prophecy have learned about them? The hermetic might have, but that's me grasping at straws. The truth is that this experience, while altogether strange, has a powerful feeling of actually happening, anchored in bodily rhythms and mental transactions just like any other. Figuring out the trick, if there is one (and how I hate to add that qualifying phrase), will take a very long time.

"This is what will be if you do nothing," Salonikas' disembodied voice says. My viewpoint whirls across space (and through peculiar extra-dimensional realms) from Mars to Earth, and spirals down to the laboratory I was working on when I accidentally stared into the red star. I see my colleagues fumbling around, trying to compensate for my absence (with limited success). As one day gives way to the next, it gets worse and worse. It's like entropy has turned against them: things fail sooner than they should, repairs take longer, and it's all very wearing. One day there's a tremendous explosion and the whole lab burns, killing everyone there and leaving only toxic residues. Similar dooms befall every group and place important to me. The last one of them goes up in a nuclear fireball, and I have the dim sense of it being misinterpreted as a deliberate strike of some kind.

The others are apparently having similar visions, though I don't pick up many of the details. Xian's disappearance leads to a military investigation by some provincial commander out to get his name in the press, and it escalates (along with other tensions) to something close to a civil war, and then there's the awakening and intervention of something that my mind wants to interpret as awakened demons or dragons. Robert's vision is of New York City, its people gone depressed and emotionally sterile, the city crumbling around them until something fails catastrophically and toxic gases drive those who remain into early graves.

Without transition, we're back in the ruins of Doissetep. "You see?" Salonikas demands. "With

you removed, there is no future worth having for the communities to which each of you has bound yourself with your accumulated decisions. You must..." He pauses. "What's that?"

We all look up. There's the red star, looking very much like it's descending straight on top of us. That vivid red light that it's terribly tempting to call evil glares down, and in the harsh shadows it casts, the ruins accelerate their decomposition. The star isn't *precisely* straight overhead, I see: it traces out a counter-clockwise orbit around the zenith, so that every part of this place gets some time to be in those consuming shadows.

The shadows are consuming our hosts, too.

"So much still to say," Porthos gasps as his feet rot away into something that looks rather like wet sand. "The birth of the avatar, the convergence of the avatar, your protection, you must know..." Abruptly he stops speaking, because a shadow has fallen across the left side of his neck and face, and it has all collapsed into dust wrapped around bone.

Salonikas leaps around in a frenzy of blurs, dodging the shadows, probably drawing on that transtemporal awareness. It works for a while, too, until the shadows momentarily run clockwise and he's diced apart. A two-story tower collapses on him, its walls intact as it begins the fall, all reduced to the same dark dust by the time they hit what remains of his corpse.

Sister Bernadette cries out in a wordless chord, until the shadows cut her off.

Robert, Xian and I all try to run, but it's hard. The shadows don't injure us, which is one thing to

be grateful for. I mutter something under my breath, and both of them say "What?" right back. A little experimentation reveals that we can hear each other when we whisper, no matter how far apart we are. We try to use that as one more advantage in searching for a route out of the ruins, but it doesn't help. In a matter of minutes, the whole place is a single vivid red sand dune, and the wind whips up waves of it. They wash up to our knees, to our waists, to our necks, over our heads. Suddenly I have the peculiar sensation of falling, falling.

When I come to rest, I open my eyes. I'm lying on dry grass, in Earth gravity. My legs once again lie useless—getting anywhere from here may be an interesting exercise. I turn my head, and see the lab, just a hundred yards away. I turn again, and there overhead is the red star, shining brightly enough that I can make it out even in the light of afternoon.

## MING XIAN

The terrible fall pulls me out of the ruins of that great chantry and away from that trio who, for all their annoying features, seemed to have the answers we would have welcomed. I come to rest and lie on familiar stony ground, not wanting to open my eyes just yet. "Robert? William?" I whisper.

"Xian." "Yes." They're both there, close as a whisper.

"Where are we?"

"Outside my lab in Raleigh." "On the roof of the apartment I was renting in New York. And you?" "How about you?" Their answers overlap.

I open my eyes. As I thought, I'm right next to the jeep I drove on my way to commune with my ancestors, back when this began. Everything looks as it was. Except, of course, for the terrible red star overhead.

## ROBERT

Here we are home for different meanings of the word. But what next? Salonikas said he showed us what would happen with us removed. Have we returned? Can we return with this mark of judgment upon us? I suppose we'll have to find out by trying to resume our lives. If there was much truth at all in what the magisters told us, time is running short.



## PART THREE: SUBTILIATION (TRANSFORMATION INTO LIQUID)

*I weep, yet my eyes can cry no more tears. My  
rose is dead and I am too numb to even feel the thorns.*

—*The Fragile Path: Testaments of the First Ca-  
bal, "The Remembrances of Eloine"*



## WILLIAM

What comes next, of course, is the debriefing. Technocratic operatives can't simply disappear from their area of assignment and reappear at home base without any record of their passage without facing some questions. And "facing some questions" means rather a lot in this context.

I feel the psionic contact with Robert and Xian fade almost at once, even as I'm struggling into my wheelchair. That's no surprise: all the Ragnarok facilities maintain extremely strong psionic dampers, as much against natural phenomena as against would-be psychic seers. (This shouldn't be a surprise. We have floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and solar flares. Why would you expect the noetic medium to be any different?) Nor is the next development any surprise: A whole squad of the Men in White shows up. What the proverbial Men in Black are to troublesome outsiders in popular folklore, the Men in White are for the Union's operations in cold hard reality. They're scary as hell, to be honest.

Without the augmentations built into my wheelchair coming back online, I wouldn't have had time to see them. They move *fast*, faster than human nervous tissue actually allows since they've replaced the sodium/potassium ion regulatory mechanism with carbonate cabling inside major nerves. They move very precisely, too, carrying out threat analyses as they go. By the time this squad of five has me surrounded, they know who I am, my recent reported movements, and everything at all relevant out of my files. They brake to a halt in perfect unison, their silver mirror shades reflecting

each other's perfectly pressed white suits. One of them pulls a pocket computer out of his jacket pocket and pokes at it. "Mr. Albacastle, this is not an approved mode of arrival. We're taking you into analytical detention."

Now there's a phrase that chills my bones. It means pretty much what it sounds like: being taken into custody and taken apart as long and as thoroughly as the investigators deem necessary. Usually what's left comes out in small containers ready for organ transplants or disposal as toxic waste. It's not a fate I much relish. "I wish to report a Category IV encounter, and operations code 720.5 assigns that immediate priority in the absence of direct manifestation of hostile intent or subvention. Please scan me and let me get on with it."

That stops the lead thug. He thinks for a moment, remembers that I'm quite right, and tilts his head slightly. The others all get out their pocket computers and fire up instruments intended to examine me for signs of manipulation by means of cybernetics, biochemical alteration, and quite a long list of other means. They can drag their feet a bit at this, and they do, but the operations code is clear. When I say I've had a Category IV encounter, that takes precedence over nearly everything this side of a repetition of the 1999 Bangladeshi incident.

And yes, of *course* we wrote in that provision deliberately. It's not our fault if Inter-Convention Security Procedures Standardization Oversight let it pass, right?

Ten minutes later (in the side door, up the elevator, across a double-doored bridgeway, up

another elevator, into the biggest room in the next-to-top floor), I'm sitting in front of an impressive bank of cameras and monitors, facing the Director of Security for the facility, the boss Man in White, and an assortment of flunkies. DirSec is an old-school sort of fellow. I sometimes think that he really wishes he were back in the Union's founding days so that he could wear silk hats and cravats without attracting skeptical attention. I don't simply think he'd like to throw me to the wolves. I know it for a fact, thanks to his comments on my fitness reports. But I also know that his sense of propriety requires him to do it purely and precisely by the rules. That's my opening: given a situation that I can't explain coherently, I can get investigations rolling and sustain them long enough to work out something adequate.

"Senior Analyst Albacastle," DirSec begins, "you assert a Category IV encounter. Please summarize the circumstances and details of the encounter."

I describe Terry Vineces presenting himself to me, and our ensuing travels. There's an interruption there from one of the flunkies. Was I aware of current protocols with regard to suspected defectors and related hostiles? "Yes, indeed I am," I say and reel off the relevant passages until it's clear that nobody can plausibly question my mastery of the code. I add, "Given that there was first information to gather and then anomalous behavior to study, I judged that on-the-spot surveillance was of paramount concern. Yes, I gambled that I'd be able either to return myself or pass on sufficient data via

standard drop procedures, but it seemed a gamble worth taking."

From there we get into verbal fencing about the details.

## ROBERT

My first sustained emotion upon returning to this little room proves to be sheer outrage. Things end, yes, but spirits endure; this is one of the most basic tenets of shamanic practice. Consequences and connections both extend far past the end of the mortal body, whether it's a worm, a tree, a person, or a larger entity like a continent or culture or cloud. Furthermore, much of the shaman's day-to-day work is learning the names and natures of individual spirits. There are categories somewhat analogous to the biological notion of species, but they only go so far in explaining beings who each originate in unique circumstances and may have nearly unlimited capacity to redesign themselves over time. So this impending apocalypse isn't just an offense against the order of spiritual life, it's *somebody else's apocalypse*, by damn. I'm just stuck dealing with it.

While I sort through my anger at it all, I feel the telepathic bond with Xian and the stranger, William, fading rapidly. By the time I'm upright, dressed, groomed, and ready to step out into the hall, I'm alone in my head. But not alone in my spirit walk! I feel faint stirrings in the dumpster down below, and know that although it may take a while yet, the Rubbish is on its way back to me.

That makes it all a lot more tolerable. For all that I sometimes curse my totem (like many other shamans), it belongs to me and I belong to it for good reasons, and I'll act more wisely in its company.

In the meantime, though, I should check on my tribe of the day. I don't feel any of that unnatural ordering that Mike and Louie were responsible for. It's too much to hope for that they just stopped it, or that they fully awakened to their power and began using it responsibly. More likely, they've a) moved on or b) been killed or otherwise seriously shut up, and I owe it to my neighbors to find out what.

The first person I meet in the hallway is one of the maids. Estella, I remember after a moment's thought. She's one of the oldest, one of the first to identify me as *el brujo*, and in her quiet faith and determination to bless her surroundings quite a potent force for good. She smiles when she sees me, and asks in her typically courteous way, "Is Mr. Robert rested today?"

I shake my head, while giving her back the same courtesy. "I'm sorry to say it, but no, ma'am. I was called away unexpectedly to deal with sick relatives, and then sent back rudely when they were done. How have things been while I was gone?" I realize that I don't actually know what the day is, and the vagaries of spirit travel being what they are, I might have been away much more (or less) time than I experienced.

She holds up two fingers and ticks off points. "Two days ago, you leave, all very sick. A terrible spirit of oppression descends on us all, a prison of up and down." I nod at that; it's as good

a description of the phenomenon as I could have managed. "One day ago, the prison is gone, back to normal." She smiles. "Today, who knows? Maybe anything."

The relief from that terrible confinement is good news, at least. "Did you see Louie or Mike?" She looks a little confused, so I describe their appearance.

Gradually she realizes who I'm talking about, and looks very serious. "Yes, I see them, and a terrible thing."

"Oh? What was it?"

"Someone burn them," she says, "on the evening of two days ago. Right out on the street. A car drive by, someone shout at them, and they burst into flame. Man in car must have throw gasoline or worse at them. They die quick, but not quick enough. Screams linger a long time."

I wince. It's not surprising: they were channeling a tremendous amount of raw power by the time I left, and if you don't know what you're doing with that, it can—and eventually will—turn on you. I would have liked the chance to make the outcome better than this, though, not least because I'm going to have to hunt down stray spirits driven unbalanced by it all. "I'm sorry, ma'am, that must have been a terrible thing for you. I will pray for you."

That meets with her approval, and she gives me a small nod. "It is good. And I pray for their souls. Something must be very wrong for death to come like that, yes?"

"Very wrong indeed. May it pass from us all."

She crosses herself. "You be good, Mr. Robert. Heaven needs you. Always too many to watch on Earth."

I don't know anything about what Heaven may want, but she's certainly right about Earth. "Thank you, ma'am, I'll do my best."

Downstairs and out through the lobby I go, feeling the currents stirred up by confined spirits now released but still feeling uncomfortable. I get a cup of coffee from the urn the day manager keeps available, sit in a chair, and sip it gently while making small offerings. A drop of hot coffee here, a sprinkle of sugar there, a strand of fresh-plucked hair to bridge them, and soon the lobby's spirits are at least listening to me, even if they're not very happy about it.

"Comfort comes," I tell them, speaking to the little eddies in the dark corners and those swirling around my feet. A single flicker overhead indicates that at least some of the lamps are paying attention as well. "Your tormenters are gone, and I will see that you are all properly fed."

Something hisses back at me from underneath my chair. "New tormenters."

Aw, hell. "New ones?"

"Outside," the unseen thing says.

"Then I'll check it out," I tell it, and drink nearly all the rest of the coffee, leaving only the dregs for the spirits. They like to feed on those.

## MING XIAN

I make the descent back down to Urumqi without any particular sense of haste. I'll have to account

for my absence for the last few days, but that's not terribly difficult; if necessary, I can always blame it on bandits, who have taken up the Western gangster tradition of kidnapping for profit. The route itself is familiar to me, and as I drive I have plenty of time to think.

My heart longs to believe that it's all a trick, or all irrelevant, that the world has many ages still to come, dynasties to rise and fall, revolutions of the celestial pole, of the sun through the galaxy, all the great cycles that science and tradition both speak of. Where is there, in any of the teachings given to me, room for the end to be *now*?

But my head knows that to deny what inner and outer senses confirm is the beginning of folly. What we have is the world as made manifest to us in accordance with our various Ways. If we do not accept the world, we have nothing else. Alone, I experienced a terrible severance thanks to the red force that the dead magician identified as Judgment. Then I experienced a peculiar rebirth, and a second death and transfiguration, all simply to arrive at the place where he and his comrades could speak to me. I think that I would be a poor custodian of my Way if I failed to grant at least some weight to what they told us. When Heaven paves the royal road to wisdom that dramatically, its servant must pay heed.

So, then, the Time of Judgment has come upon us. (My thoughts get this far as I come down out of the mountains, and onto the lowlands highways. Tanker trucks stalled for reasons unclear to me give me more time to think.) My old mistresses, the Wu Keng, will never achieve the throne of China, or

at least not long enough for it to matter. Nor will their old rivals, the arch-chauvinist men of the Wu Lung. Nor will anyone else. The current premier is the closest there will ever be to an emperor of All Under Heaven. That's a depressing thought, to put it mildly. My ancestors, like so many others, had always hoped for a more righteous day, and it will never come to them.

What can there be for me, in the time remaining? Poor dead Magister Porthos, Sister Bernadette, Magister Salonikas. The Red Star sought them out, as it sought out we living three. It was aware of our unusual power to come. That thought terrifies me. If judgment comes first to all the most powerful, then the weak will be left on their own to face dissolution. How can their souls possibly be ready for that? Even in normal times, they need teachers and guides to tend to their little crises and show them the Way through difficulties. Soon, perhaps, they'll have to do the most perilous passage of all on their own. It seems a cruel trick on the part of the cosmos.

As I drive through the industrial wastelands, leaving the tanker trucks behind at last and alternating between the highway and branching side roads, I become angry at the whole tragedy. This land around me could blossom again, given many years of loving cultivation, prayerful ritual, and blessings in the tending. Heaven has chosen not to allow it. I cannot help but see this as a blemish in what ought to be perfection. The thing is so sudden, so hasty. I will never put myself in opposition to the will of Heaven, having no desire to become one of the hungry ghosts or worse, but I also choose

not to acquiesce in any victory for corruption and waste that I might yet fight. The great masters of the Way teach that the small is reflected in the big, and vice versa. Our gardens speak of forests and jungles, the lights in our hallways and cars of the rivers of stars.

I determine that if I have no time to redeem the big, I may yet nevertheless redeem the small. If China cannot pass into Heaven with a worthy emperor on the throne, still there might be some justice and virtue to be had in Xingjian Uygur, or Urumqi, or the seventh district, or my block. Heaven's hastiness cannot keep me from ministering as I may.

## WILLIAM

By midnight on the second day of interrogation, I think I have a pretty full sense of their agenda. My old friend Terry is apparently part of a trend toward former magician-styled reality deviants turning to psychotic philosophies and developing previously unsuspected aptitude for very dodgy psionic manipulation of the world at very low structural levels. The thing that the Men in White and the supporting Tac Ops guys really want to know is whether there's a causal link (and if so, in which direction—psychosis to power or vice versa), or whether the power comes from something unrelated. They're also waiting for me to start a little cracking up of my own, and in addition to their scientific interest, the ones I've alienated along the way are hoping for some good old-fashioned horror-movie entertainment.

I don't oblige them, of course. I don't have the sort of power they think I do, and while they may disapprove, the fact is that I am not anywhere close to the boundaries of acceptable Union outlook. The closest I come to anything that would warrant action is the anger I display at having my usual wheelchair taken away. Granted it makes sense, since they don't want me going all MacGyver at an inopportune moment, but still, this twenty-year-old clunker they've given me for the duration of interrogation just sucks. I let them know just how much I disapprove of it and remind them of choice Union codes when it comes to the wasteful prosecution of ill-founded cases. That latter part would probably be more convincing if they didn't have good evidence of my running around in the midst of the hematovore mystery and consorting with the worst kind of fucking weirdo, but one takes one's leverage where one may.

The great escape begins just after midnight. A young guard I remember from the security around telescope transport keeps me company. Well, okay, he's watching me and under orders to shoot me if I try to violate my restraints—and if he's as good as he once he was, I wouldn't have much of a chance if I did. We're seven floors down from interrogation with three to go before detention level, when the power goes out.

Now, you have to understand the context. The Union just loves to play test-of-loyalty games. The odds are very good that UV and IR sensors have the elevator covered six ways from Sunday and they're just hoping I'll try to escape

now, when they'd be justified in shooting me down. It's not as good as resisting arrest, but attempting escape is right up there on the list of causes of death for Union operatives in trouble. I decide to stay right where I am and wait for the power to come back.

The guard has his own ideas.

Maybe three or four minutes after the power goes out, he leans down to me and whispers, "Don't worry, Mr. Albacastle, we'll get you out of here just fine."

"Of course you will," I say, while wondering what's up with the whispering. "As soon as the power comes back..."

"No, sir, it's not that," the guard interrupts, continuing to whisper. "I mean out of this facility and onto the Freedom Road."

This has got to be a trap set for me. The Freedom Road is one of the most nauseating gatherings of Union dissidents I know of, legendary for its collective self-righteousness and tendency toward religious delusion. Naturally the guard assigned to me right now happens to sympathize. Of course. Uh huh. Pull the other one—it jingles. "Thank you, but the whole point of this is that I'm entirely loyal to the Union. I intend to clear myself. Heading out as a notorious fugitive would not look good on my record."

"Sir, this is no laughing matter," he insists. "You have to get out of here before it's all destroyed."

"Destroyed?"

"Yes, sir. The paperwork's in process for a general sterilization after extended contamination on the memetic and bacteriological levels. They say

that someone violated containment protocols on hematovore specimens and besides, we have too many troublemakers."

"Do they now."

He's oblivious to the irony in my voice. "Yes, sir. But you need not to go up in smoke. That's why I have to do this now." Suddenly he's tightening up the straps holding me in place and prying open the elevator doors, illuminating the space with a pocket flashlight tucked into my handcuffs. Oh, shit, the realization dawns on me, the fucker's serious about this.

"Tell me, Agent," I say as cautiously as I can. "Why me?"

"You've been so close to the truth," he continues with that deeply annoying, earnest tone, "that the Road needs you to help them prepare."

"So they're going to break out other prisoners?" That would be surprisingly prosaic for that crew, and something I could actually get behind in at least some cases.

"No, not *that*." He gets impatient. "I mean that you've had personal encounters with the real locus of sin in the world, and we need your experience." My hope immediately fades; I can't get behind this in any case I can think of.

"That's rather unusual terminology," I finally manage. "Has there been an update to policy on discussion of ethical consequences I missed?"

"This isn't about the Union," he snaps, "they're part of the problem. The real problem is that the Lord of Sin is gathering up those who bear his curse, and whatever he's up to, it can't be any good." By this time he's got the doors

opened and is pushing me down a hallway lit only by the battery-powered secondaries. Not all of those, either. Could we be under attack by someone able to engage in a bit of photovoltaic damping? That wouldn't be good.

I decide to keep it honest. "I don't believe in anything like your Lord of Sin and certainly haven't seen anything to suggest that I've run into him. So what the hell are you talking about?"

He stops for a moment, and sounds surprised. "The Lord of Sin, of course! The first murderer! Cain! Don't the boys in Ragnarok Strat Ops spend any time looking at these things, even if they don't believe them?"

The truth is that we spend a lot of time looking at a lot of bullshit, and I have computers to keep the archives constantly indexed precisely so that I don't have to remember it myself. No human brain is big enough to encompass all the ways people try to explain creepy strange things making their lives miserable. "Assume for the moment I haven't and brief me," I try. I look around, noticing more of the battery lights flickering. I'm having trouble working out just where we are. Beyond a vague sense of service passages at ground level and immediately below, I frankly don't have much of a clue. If anything happens to Sin Watcher Boy here, I could be in real trouble.

"It turns out that there's more truth to some of the biblical early history than you might think," he explains. "There actually is an individual called Cain, and has been for as long as we can dig up records. And he's got a power that

simply doesn't fit Union models at all... which is just why I'm with the Road now. I was part of a field team assigned to track and debunk some of these stories in ex-Soviet territories, and we found that we couldn't."

"Uh huh," I say noncommittally. Ex-Soviet? More likely that he got his brains addled by leaking toxic waste or something of the sort.

"You don't believe me yet, but that's okay." That surprises me, since I don't usually expect that level of awareness in crypto-religious fanatics. "You'll find out soon enough, I think." He looks around the corner. "Damn." I wheel myself around to see, and agree with him: half a dozen steps up to an emergency exit. The backup lights there are completely off, I notice, too. "Hold on, I've done this before," he says, and almost before I can react, he's managed to tilt me back and haul me up all six steps. He's scarcely even breathing hard. "Hospital orderly," he comments by way of explanation.

Then we're heading out of the main building and along a covered walkway, past currently vacant truck stalls. All at once the canopy ends, letting me look right up into the night sky. The moon is right about new. (I shake my head at that. Memory tells me it was nearly full that first night in Bosnia. Of course memory inserts the full moon often into moments of emotional significance; I've seen the studies. I just hate confirming a generalization about human frailty like that.) A flash of movement catches my eye, and I turn to see dark, more or less human figures running across the lawn substantially faster

than most actual humans can, and leaping up a full story and more to clamber up the complex's buildings.

"Vampires," the guard says, just as I say, "Hematovores." Same thing in practical terms. He takes hold of the wheelchair's handgrips and starts pushing me just short of a flat-out run. At the inner perimeter, he pulls me to a halt alongside one of the security vans, pushes open the side door, and manages to hoist me in without too much effort. Once he's got the motor running, I say, "I'd like to watch for a minute. I've never actually seen them in operation like this, not at liberty."

He glances at me before turning back to survey the whole complex. "You don't think they'll come for you, too?"

"Not so fast that you'll have no time to respond." That pleases him, I can tell. It's good to have something to be pleased about, because these fuckers are destroying the whole place. They're astoundingly strong, for starters, capable of punching through the reinforced doors and windows and yanking out the shattered remains. They're fast, and they're keeping up longer than I'd expect, knowing as I do that they rely on finite stores of blood and related chemicals. Efficient bloodsuckers, then.

The guards inside and the automated turrets outside are both firing away, but it doesn't seem to do much good. When one of the hematovores is silhouetted on the rooftop, I can see blood fly out of the back of her head (from a well-placed sniping shot) only to curve around in mid-air

and plunge back in. Before the thing's even out of my line of sight, the wound seems to have healed over. I've never seen a report of anything like that.

Nor has my rescuer, apparently. But unlike me, he thinks he's got this answer. "This is just what I was going to tell you about next," he whispers while three vampires take turns pulling technicians out of one of the second-floor labs, eviscerating them, and drinking the arterial spray.

"What can your Cain have to do with this?" I'm actually more curious than angry.

"I told you," he says with a touch of petulance. "Cain was—is—the first vampire. Whatever it is that folklore records as the mark of God on him, something happened to him to make him immortal but dependent on blood. And he can pass the power-slash-curse on to others."

"So the heirs of an early Semitic clan are ripping up our friends?" Sometimes flippancy is what keeps you together. I'm watching more massive gunfire tear through the hematovores with deadly precision, and I'm watching it not matter at all to them. If I were in among my colleagues, I'd be dead or dying now myself.

"The last heirs, yes."

"Eh?" The kookery has just taken a turn for the unexpected.

"That's the rest of the story," he says while slowly backing the van up toward a gateway that seems intact and away from the hematovores' area of interest. "Cain is taking his gift back. You saw it in Bosnia."

"One of the hematovores is killing the others?"

"That's about as useful as saying that the chariot of the sun is passing beneath us now on its way to the gates of the east. Just because you can describe a phenomenon in reductionist terms doesn't mean that it has just a reductionist truth."

I prefer not to concede any merit to that claim, even though I've argued it myself in other contexts. "I'll stick with my observations and evidence until something better comes along. But say you're right. Certainly there was something preying on the victims of EU1. What's that got to do with this?"

"These are the ones allowed to remain. They have disproportionate strength because what power Cain hasn't yet taken back is now distributed among fewer hosts."

"That's it?"

"That's it." He's concentrating on turning around to drive through the gate, so he doesn't have time to notice or react when I grab his gun. I shoot him once in the head and twice in the chest, and push out the body for the hematovores to take care of, if they want it. Then I maneuver myself behind the wheel, unfold the rods I use to poke the pedals when I have to drive a vehicle that isn't already adapted for legless operation, and drive off. Behind me, years of work and two hundred dedicated men and women all perish.

## ROBERT

Like most shamans, I usually operate alone, but that doesn't mean I lack contacts. As I prowl along the sidewalk, hoping to pick up some residue of

Mike or Louie's death that might help me understand more, I think about people I might contact.

The more I think about it, the more I'm reminded of one of Bruce Cockburn's songs. "If this were the last night of the world/what would I do different?" I look up at the nearby skyscrapers, several of them surrounded by scaffolds and cranes, and think of them never brought to completion. Two pregnant women sit on a stoop the next block down. Will their children be born? In the tree that provides me a scrap of shade here, a young male robin sings his mating song. Will it matter? It's very tempting to just pull myself into a hole and wait for however long it might be.

I smile briefly at the thought of that spacecrafter Anders. The news would make his day. Didn't he say he wanted to play his final concert someplace prominent, like the Arc de Triomphe? Maybe he can have enough time to get the gig together and divine out the right moment for it. Then there's my one-time mentor, the mostly crazed anti-Technocracy one-man guerrilla movement, Xoca. If I tell him, he'll just find some way to blame it on the Technocracy and try to figure out the biggest blaze of glory he can manage in the time remaining.

There's a rustle in the gutter despite the absence of breeze, and I spot the Rubbish tumbling along through old newspapers and wrappers. Its antics make me smile. "Hello," I greet it. The passersby will just see me talking to the gutter, but as long as I don't make any trouble for them, they'll take it in stride and dismiss me as one more brain-

damaged veteran of the drug wars. New Yorkers are good at that.

The Rubbish waves a classified ads section back at me. "Hello, Robert! It is a happy day to be with you, and to be just me."

"What was it like to be doubled that way?" Not that I really expect a good answer from a creature that can't really talk about anything but the present, but then life is full of surprises. For a little while yet, at least.

Pieces of the Rubbish flutter in uncoordinated manner. "I am just me. Not comfortable to be me and someone else, too. I like being me, not want to be part of everything. Not want the judge."

"You know about Telos and the rest of it?"

"I know it in your knowing, Robert. The necessary wisdom flows between us. I understand what your soul needs me to understand. So I understand that it is time to judge."

I squat a little closer, ignoring the occasional disparaging glance thrown my way by the young men come to stock up at the liquor store for the night's impending parties. "What does that mean to you?"

The Rubbish makes a little hand to point at the rest of itself. "I am all these things. Someone looks at them and says this is good, that is bad, and gives me a reward for the good." The voice turns a little pleading. "A reward is nice, yes?"

I chuckle at that and gather several cigarette butts into a loose pyramid. The Rubbish gratefully sucks on the remaining intact portions of tobacco.

"It is nice," I say. "But tell me about judgment."

"I am judged and I rest. All spirits rest."

"Forever?" But there's no hope with that; the concept just passes the Rubbish by. We set the subject aside and chat about the disturbances in the neighborhood. The Rubbish can still feel the echoes of Mike and Louie's prison, and seems to have a general sense of distress about the whole thing.

In the midst of our conversation, someone taps me on the shoulder and says, "Hey, 'scuse me?" I turn around to see... truthfully, I'm not good at judging the age of guys like this. He might be fifteen or thirty, with his slightly out-of-date skateboarder style and goatee. Physically he's intact, but his aura is one of the most disturbing things I've seen. The top of his aural crown is completely gone, and wisps of his essence are trailing out the top. And since there's a shower of spirit rain now, the spiritual equivalent of black sludge is falling in. He seems alert, or at least no less glazed than most skater dudes, but I fear that he might collapse from the trauma at any moment.

He looks down straight at the Rubbish and waves. "Hey, little trash guy." The Rubbish seems as surprised as I am, but waves back.

"Um," I begin in my boldest, most confident way. "Hey. Um. What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure, but. It's like this. I was sitting at the bus stop over there, and thinking about the last time I saw 2001 all good and stoned. I could see that red eye of HAL's almost like it was floating in front of me, and then there was this big *ow* like someone smacked me in the back of the head, only not with a hammer. You know."

"Actually, I do, I think." If the Red Star makes a habit of manifesting in pop cultural terms, this could all get very, very messy indeed.

"So I'm sitting there with God's own headache, and then I look around me. Looks like almost everyone's on fire in a cheap movie, oozing little bits of smoke. Except you. Well, you and the garbage dude here. You're not smoking, you're all crisp. So I figured that you might know what I should be doing." He clutches his head, and I can readily believe the spirit rain hurts here.

"Here, give me your hat for a sec." He hands over his Yankees cap without a word. I tug on it, roll the lining around a bit, and pick up little dusty fragments of the Rubbish to run along the band. That should provide him with some protection for the moment—enough to get more information, maybe. It sounds like this guy just went through a spontaneous shamanic awakening, and obviously I'd like to know more. "Okay, here you go." I hand it back and gesture at the lobby of my hotel. "Let's get in out of the street. You'll think better there."

"Okay, makes sense," he says. I can see that the hat is indeed bouncing off some of the spirit rain, but when he turns his head to look at a couple of gorgeous women across the street, black sludge oozes out of his ears. The unawakened don't see it, but they can sense something's wrong, and they're all giving us some extra space. I don't think the skater's noticed yet, preoccupied as he is.

I introduce myself once we're seated, and explain that yes, I'm sort of a traveling advisor to people having problems like his. I try to steer

clear of shamanic imagery, since it often confuses or irritates people already distracted by weird-to-them developments. He says his name is Lenny, a good old Brooklyn name, and that up until now he never had anything like this except, you know, on really good dope. He wouldn't be the first latent shaman whose talent lay forever untapped and brought to the surface only in altered states.

Lenny looks worse and worse as we talk. How much spirit rain got into him, anyway? He starts quietly freaking out. "Everything's alive, Bob. It's all crawling around and it's all talking at me and I can't handle this." The desk clerk gives me the hairy eyeball. I shrug, but figure I need to get Lenny out of there. And honestly, I would have liked to, except that fate intervenes—or judgment maybe. Lenny looks down at his hands and sees the individual spirits that normally merge their identities to make up the human soul. They're unraveling. Fast. I grab for the major strands, but the things burn as if they'd been dipped in acid. He has time for one very loud shriek before his soul positively explodes in a dark mist, and then his body collapses for want of anything to animate it.

Damn it. That was a failure worse than any I've had in quite a while. I look up to see the desk clerk punching 911 on the ancient princess phone he favors, and decide that it's time to be on my way.

## TING XIAN

Here in my neighborhood in Urumqi, life continues relatively normally. Outside, I believe, time is coming somewhat unhinged. It certainly seems that things are moving faster and faster.

I must turn my face against all that to do such good as I can right here. There are, after all, Uyгур laborers and proletarians who need family planning assistance as much as ever. I speak to worried young wives about what sort of health they should be in to safely bear children, while I think that their children will not come. I speak to anxious young machinists and teamsters about what they can do to protect themselves on the job so that their sperm won't become loaded with toxic waste, and I show them the measures available while thinking that perhaps, at the end of the world, genes don't count for much. I speak to love-struck teens concerned about how too-early pregnancy might ruin their prospects, and I do not let on to them that I think their college years are as imaginary as the kingdom of Prester John and the domain of the Yellow Emperor. If I'm right, that will all become clear soon enough.

It is so hard. I want to just sit and cry, or go off to a beautiful mountain and purify myself. But then this is what comes of wanting righteousness for All Under Heaven. I always knew that the emperor as minister between Heaven and Earth would get little rest, but the realities of it have never been so terribly vivid to me as they are right now. Every morning I rise with a few more aches and pains, and every night I lie down

alone in my little rooms and wonder if I will see the sun rise again or perhaps if the Red Star will at least shine on me as it shone on those poor ghostly magicians. I wish for a man to hold me in the night, but I fear that it would be a distraction from my duties: above all, I do not have the luxury of tending to myself.

Does any of this make the slightest amount of difference? I argue it with myself every day, as I go about my routine of advising, listening and prescribing. When I'm inclined to doubt, I remember that Confucius and Mencius agreed that when the people starve, they cannot think of their duty. Insofar as I remove these people's fears about their temptations and failures, I make it that much easier for them to live virtuously. I can only hope it is enough—and sometimes I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is not.

The first time I see this, the day begins much like any other. But not long after I open my office, in comes a soldier. An ethnically Chinese soldier—Han like me, with the round features of someone born into one of the southern provinces. He's a long way from home. At first I tense, expecting that he might be on an official or unofficial mission of vengeance against me, but it turns out to be nothing of the sort. I don't register his words in any detailed way: words are becoming less and less important to me as I immerse myself in the essences of the souls around me and trust in the Way to convey my meanings to them.

What I feel is his passionate desire to protect the land. He speaks to me of Mencius's parable of Bull Mountain, the beautiful moun-

tain that represents the higher feelings, logged bare and made ugly. He was a military policeman in one of the valleys flooded by Three Gorges Dam and is traveling in search of opportunities to atone for his collaboration with that wickedness. I do not entirely understand what official duty he has for this mission, but does it matter? Scout, courier, surveyor, internal affairs investigator, there are many masks that the righteous man may use in his travels in such circumstances.

He becomes more and more agitated as he speaks. He does not realize this, but I know that his inner eye is opening, and because of his passion, it is drawn first to what is wrong and malign here. So he sees the full complexities of the deliberately inadequate housing, the lack of pollution monitoring, the schemes for industry made without reference to the people's skills or inclinations, and it wounds him. I try to intervene to treat him, but he won't have it, not until he can clearly determine my own purity. Higher and higher the pitch of his voice, faster and faster the beating of his yearning heart, until at last it's too much. He collapses. And with the eyes of yin awareness, I see his soul. It does not rise to Heaven to meet with the ministers. It sinks down toward the Thousand Hells.

What sin was it that dragged him down? I can't know. But I can see that the holiest fire for virtue is not enough, in this dreadful end time, to save a man such as him. And if there is no redemption for him, there can scarcely be any for the rest of us.

I take that day off. I realize that neglecting my duties, even for a mourning such as this, is itself an act of vice that may taint my own soul that crucial bit more. Nevertheless, I am too weak and worn to continue this day. I will grieve, and perhaps in the morning I may find some reason to continue.

And that is only the first time. Then there comes the second, and the third, and the fourth... I am a very tiny reed in the mighty river that is the Way. Just how long can I endure?

Perhaps it is not my lot to see judgment day either. I fear that this recitation is too dry, but it is all I can manage right now. If I engage too closely with these memories, I fear that my poor worn soul will break once and for all. I must make myself like the chroniclers of old, like Sima Qian who chose to accept the pain and humiliation of castration so that he could finish his grand record. I cut myself off from emotion long enough to finish this duty, and promise myself that I will resume feeling when it's done.

## WILLIAM

Another day, another kill zone, that seems to be the pattern of my life now. I remember a particular image from H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, which no movie version ever caught quite the way I imagined it to be. As the time traveler goes faster into the past or future, the sun moves faster and faster until it's an essentially continuous band of light, shifting north and south with the axial tilt of the seasons and in response to longer-term cycles of polar reorientation. Of course, I'm no time trav-

eler and time itself isn't actually going faster (it can't within a given inertial framework) but it sure feels ever more tiresome.

The day after my escape from the collapsing Ragnarok, I set about arranging for better transportation. The first step is money, and this is precisely why every field agent sets aside a slush fund. After a couple transactions with an ATM and a custom card, I've got all the money I need on tap via pristine accounts (swiped at the source from credit companies I did some contract work for years ago; back doors can stay in place an astoundingly long time). With that I can order an accessible van arranged to my taste from an agency that'll deliver it to my motel room, assuming I'm still alive when it arrives. Once that's taken care of, I arrange for a replacement wheelchair and some personal firepower through covert channels I've built up over the years.

That actually makes it sound more impressive than it is. The fact is that most people will sell you their stuff if the price is right and if you demonstrate some basic reliability. Right now I'm mostly buying from people whom I've helped out over the years: this one whose shipping business was being exploited by hematovores, this one whose brother got into necromancy and created a veritable shit storm of poltergeist phenomena before I took him out, this one who'd been caught in an FBI sting operation looking for specialist pornographers and who would be rotting in jail if it weren't my helping her with fake ID and relocation (in exchange for the info I needed to do some walk back on the FBI agents involved,

but that's another story). It's just like any other trading in personal favors, simply more combustible. And governmental monitoring of communication channels is *way* overrated. A simple combination of personal code and decades-old encryption schemes suffices for these calls.

To the slack-jawed yokels who run this hotel in the ass end of Nowheresville, Deep South, I'm just a cranky-looking crip who tips surprisingly well and who ain't queer but also ain't interested in a hooker. Works for me. Oh, they also know that I appreciate good barbecue and am willing to take some tips to the good places to eat in whatever the next wide-spot-in-the-road pathetic excuse for a town is. If anything gets hung up more than a couple of days, I'll probably buy some dope off them, just by way of supporting the image.

All that done, I have time to sit and think. I jot notes on paper and on my PDA, develop causality diagrams, consider catastrophe surfaces worth applying to the situation. It's hard to get much beyond the obvious: "I am so fucked right now." But I knew that already. What I need now is a sense of what to do next.

Some of the folks I wanted to buy supplies from weren't at all inclined to sell, and one of them let slip that it was because he doesn't touch doomed ventures. Word of Ragnarok's collapse is getting around, apparently. I slide into some of the loose news relays around the edges of Union distribution systems and find that it wasn't just my facility that got gakked last night. Swarms of hematovores attacked *most* of the facilities, apparently. And then

a lot of them died before the night was through, their blood quite literally boiling in their veins. Damn it, it's hard not to start giving credence to that whole Cain nonsense, and I take a break to lay in a little self-hypnosis to help me maintain a proper outlook. I really need not to collapse into religious hysteria right now.

I can't assemble a complete map of the disaster just right now. It probably suffices to say that it's a nearly complete loss. And I catch wind that the Men in White are very interested in speaking to survivors. So I've got to keep a low profile and away from the usual Union watering holes. Pfehah.

Beneath that, there's the question of what the hell happened to me starting in Bosnia. I absolutely refuse to believe in the literal truth of all that bullshit. But how the hell can I find out where experience ended and manipulation began? If I could get the attention of some good cross-convention analytical unit, I bet we could pin it down quickly, but that's not in the cards. I go around and around about this, and end up not actually reaching any firm conclusions. I guess I'll have to wing it, keeping open to possibilities and trying not to form any particularly strong opinions in the meantime. (That's opinions beyond "all that bullshit," which I think is worth holding with conviction.)

In some ways it would be easier if I were to manifest systems of standard mental illness. (Don't talk to me about "insanity." There's organic dysfunction and deviant behavior, and nothing else.) But no. I can do a lot of self-testing to establish sound neurology and at least partially sound neurochemistry, and the other stuff isn't anything like

typical symptomatology. I'm the victim of conscious manipulation rather than things going wrong at the medical layer of existence. I feel a sudden sympathy with some of the poor bastards I've helped railroad over the years, considered unreliable after the wrong kind of encounter with reality deviants. Well, I certainly am unreliable; I'd fire me. But since it's just me, I have to keep at it. Grunk.

I do think about contacting some of the Freedom Road crew, or any of the other semi-organized dissident groups I have leads on. I decide against it, for several reasons. First, if I know about them, there is at least a decent chance that internal security agents do too, and I don't want to end up talking to an undercover cop or a narc, either for the Union itself or the civil authority. Second, pretty much all the dissident groups are worse off than I am. Freedom Road's always been prone to religious mania, and it sounds like they're at it again. Then there are the orgone freaks, the advocates of whatever this year's flavor of anti-Einsteinian ether physics is, and the ones who regard electrical appliances as innately carcinogenic, not to mention that bunch who think that absolute monarchy can be established as objectively best fit for certain obscure genetic factors. No thanks. Instead, I put out tracers for my comrades at Ragnarok. I could do a lot better even with the nimrods from there than with these other bozos.

And that's how I pass the next night, working out what I can and ought to do. Sometimes I think I should have taken up the hick on his hooker offer after all.

## ROBERT

For a ghastly week or so, I wonder if these doomed awakenings are happening because of me, because of undisciplined power hauled back from Doissetep or whatever. It takes that long for me to establish that similar incidents are happening ahead of me and in places I'm not going. In the second week, the mainstream press picks up on it as a wave of mysterious psychoses afflicting people of average and above average intelligence and average and above average introspection. Rumors of biochemical warfare follow not long thereafter. I don't like the panic around that, but it does provide me with some extra margin of safety, the further it all gets from the truth.

At the end of the second week, I finally call on... well, not a friend, but at least an informed colleague to talk with about this stuff. George Brown is an Iroquois medicine man who works for the Defense Intelligence Agency as some sort of specialized analyst. We met right after the millenium, when I was on a canoeing trip with friends. His totem raven took umbrage at the Rubbish, and we got to talking after breaking up the spiritual equivalent of a catfight. From time to time I've passed him information, and occasionally he sends me something. I remember him after a few days of aimless wandering and arrange for a meeting in Columbus. It's hot and sticky and I wish I was elsewhere, but right now this part of the world is relatively calm. I perch in a donut shop and wait for him.

Some people just are born to be soldiers, I think. George is about six feet four, with square

features and muscles such as I can only dream of. He's precise in his movements and soft spoken in the way that marks people who know they never need to shout. That's real authority, George said at our first meeting, and I agreed both then and now. He's in khakis and polo shirt now, but honestly, you only have to look at him to know that he's a soldier.

He doesn't smile as he sits down. "I was able to cook up some plausible reasons for this trip, but I'm not happy about it. Things are getting strange, Robert."

"No fooling..." I stop. "You're not just referring to what I called about, are you?"

He shakes his head. At the extreme end of each turn, a single hair flies loose and traces spirals in the air. I recognize a low-keyed but powerful privacy warding. "No, I'm not," he confirms. "It's chaos on a great many fronts. Someone is taking out Technocratic and suspected Technocratic facilities at an alarming rate. Not that I mind the destruction, but I don't want the Union panicking. And whoever it is, they're also taking out facilities we have no reason to suspect are connected to the Union, which means reappraisal on top of everything else. But that's not all." He lays out a horrific litany of what we can both recognize as signs of the spirit world running amok. It includes both private tragedies and some very public displays, which we agree will be difficult to deal with.

Some of the biggest changes will affect the world indirectly. The spirits that inhabit, draw on, and define the souls of the various planets are get-

ting wiped out in battles I can barely understand. As they die, the meaning of the planets will change. Popular astrology is almost entirely a bundle of superstitions, but there are truths underneath it all. Saturn has embodied wisdom, time, and age, for instance. Now those associations will become unreliable. People will behave differently without knowing why.

The pathways between points of stability just beyond the material world and out into the realm of the planetary souls are crumbling, too, some attacked and some apparently just wearing out. That's already manifesting in a general sense of isolation and alienation. People feel that the places far from them are becoming stranger, less relevant to them, fearful and worth avoiding. George speculates that physical communication will become less reliable as well, since mere matter can't do much without spirit sustaining it, and I find his reasoning sound.

The Red Star now shines openly, in at least some parts of the world. (Why not all? Are some areas particularly blessed, or protected, or just saved for later abuse? I need a spiritually aware astronomer to bounce ideas off of, and they've never been very common.) It isn't always associated with doom, but often. Some of those manifestations of doom are interesting, too: there are—or rather, were—things loose in the world that were sustained only by ancient curses, like vampires and haunting ghosts. These things are apparently gone now, or at least a lot less common. Were I a monotheist, I'd say that God finally became bored with the world. As it is, I think (and here George follows my analysis) that

the very deep merging of spiritual forces is breaking the pockets of isolated power on which those curses depended.

So far there isn't much manifestation of the union that's supposed to wait at the end of time. Insofar as I ever believed in such a thing, I assumed that it would be a building up from existing things. Instead it seems to be a breaking down, with the most atomistic fragments of shattered souls dripping down into the pools of being.

"This sucks," George remarks. I agree.

It turns out that he hasn't heard much of my own original concern, the wave of awakenings gone bad. He takes notes as I describe the half-dozen cases I've dealt with so far, and then a separate page for the incidents I've heard of but not witnessed personally. Then he looks right at me and says, "You have a theory about the underlying cause. Tell it to me."

"I do, but how did you know?"

"Intuition and a great deal of experience reading body language. Tell me."

So I do, starting with the first appearance to me of the Red Star and ending with my decision to contact him.

"The end of the world," he says flatly.

"As I understand it," I agree.

He smiles briefly. "Grandfather will be so pissed off."

"Eh?"

The smile vanishes even as he tells a light-hearted story. "Grandfather complains more about other people's complaints than anyone else I know of. He has a very lengthy rant about how every gen-

eration tells him they've got it worse, and they never do. This time he's wrong, though...." The words trickle off. "When?"

"Don't know."

Snippets of other people's conversation drift across our mutual silence. "...oughta be a law against..." "...and so she says that she don't *like* the sport..." "...it's the damn hippies and don't you tell me that it can't be, who can trust the calendar nowadays..."

That gets George's attention. "Even lay people are noticing it."

"Huh. I thought it was just me having problems with altered perceptions."

"Not at all," he breaks in while I pause to consider how to trace more connections. "Individual days and nights remain about the same length as ever, but all the markers of meaning have gone awry. Subjective sense of experience is diminished, so that time seems to flow faster. It's like the inner structures of the calendar are melting and running out. If they go away, we'll be left with a calendar devoid of significance, and that worries me a *lot*. Have you ever seen an unnamed place?"

I shudder at the memory. Yes, once not long after my awakening, Xoca took me deep into the Latin American mountains, to see a town he knew of. The town's leaders had tried to protect themselves forever by removing their name from the world, and ended up simply plunging the whole town into the abyss. It was much worse than looking at the blind spot, because nothing in the blind spot crawls or weeps. The thought of the whole world like that is somehow quite a bit less than comforting.

"What can we do about it, do you think?" This is George's best thing. If anyone can suggest a practical course of action, it'll be him.

"I don't know. I'm going to have to gather more data and reinterpret the whole thing." He gets up in a single smooth move, almost like folding himself to get out. "Keep in touch." And then he's gone, back out to the car that is the first step on his trip home.

## WILLIAM

In the end, all the elaborate gear doesn't do me that much good.

There's a whole genus of jokes about running over Elvis, Bigfoot, and the like while on some back road in Tennessee or wherever. I've told quite a few myself, and enjoyed songs that set some of the more entertaining ones to music. Unfortunately, when it happens to me, it's less than entertaining. It's not that I actually run into Elvis or Bigfoot, but...

Okay, let me take this from the beginning. It takes a week for all my orders to arrive, and by that time it's clear that something's really wrong with the world. I'm reminded of some of Michael Moorcock's stories, where entropy is apparently running out in the 1970s, for no particular reason. It may be a few decades later now, but it's something like that, if it's not total hallucination. Man, I wish it were, but if it is, then *everything* is a hallucination, and I'm not prepared to go around acting as if I think I'm a brain in a jar in some unknowable universe. Better to accept this one getting strange and try to deal with it.

Except, of course, that there's nothing to be done in dealing with it. I learn from Technocracy feeds that the hematovores seem to have slaughtered each other off. That's good. But then there are the strange hybrid entities that think of themselves as werewolves fighting wars of their own. And... zombies? Jesus H-for-Haploid Christ, if the world's going to go insane, could it please do so with a modicum of fucking taste? But I should have expected it to be this stupid and tacky. Something in the world had to make humanity the mess it's been, after all. I only ever wanted to get beyond it, and now the whole damn show is collapsing to spite me. I'd commit suicide if it wouldn't just be capitulation. I didn't give in to schoolyard bullies and I'm not going to give into galactic-scale quantum fluctuations either.

A lot of my former colleagues aren't so lucky or determined, unfortunately. There's apparently a plague of psychosis making the rounds on top of everything else, and I keep finding records of agents and high-level operatives suddenly deciding that "they" were right—for some value of "they" or another. It might be the Freemasons, or the Inquisition, or the pagan legacy, or even stupider stuff. Makes them useless to me, in any event. And with so many gone that way, or killed in accidents, or just plain disappeared, the chains of command are collapsing right and left. The Union is pretty damn disunited within a couple weeks.

Back when I was with the suckers, excuse me, with the Council of the Nine Traditions, we used to talk about how things would be so much

better if only the evil bad Technocracy could be removed. What a crock of shit that turned out to be. As the Union crumbles, everything that our—a Technocratic “our” this time—forces tried to keep in check breaks loose. For a while I’m on my own, since there are just enough of my fellow Union members whose idea of a suitable response to the crisis is to eliminate all traitors, real and suspected.

That begins to change early one morning, while I’m on the road somewhere west of Albuquerque, looking in my rear-view mirror from time to time at a gray sedan that I’m quite sure contains a Man in White and a couple of his flunkies. There are also a growing number of momentary instabilities to watch, and it would be fascinating to study the breakdown of governing constants at fundamental levels of existence if I could do so without getting shot at. Sunrise is coming in a few minutes, straight ahead of me, and I’ve got my dark glasses ready to put on as soon as I need them. Quite suddenly, something small comes zipping over the hills off to the south, moving at what seems like a really implausible speed if the perspective I’ve got is letting me assess it correctly. Naturally, I assume it isn’t.

Turns out my initial guess was right, though. It’s a private plane, a Cessna or something else with two props, moving right about the speed of sound. As it comes up over those hills, it briefly brushes the lower edge of growing clouds and I can see the bow shock as it passes. There’s no way those props are moving it that fast. It’s got a

hidden motor or, I suppose, it's doing something more exotic.

Behind the plane, I now see, are two smaller planes, too small for any human pilot. They might be cyborg units, or they might be remotes controlled by some operator I haven't seen yet. They're slightly faster than the plane and firing at it as they approach. The plane is taking hits but so far without any external sign of major damage. Still, this is not a winning situation for the plane's pilot. He, she or it (it dawns on me that the plane might also be remotely operated, after all) is handling the thing amazingly well, exploiting the particular strains that operate right below the speed of sound. The plane must be rattling and shaking in really painful ways, but its overall movements are still smooth and steady. The bow shock fades as the plane pulls down below the clouds again, but now I've got the thing's pleasure and can judge its speed for myself.

I decide that this bears some watching, and pull over. The sedan tailing me pulls over a hundred yards back. Its occupants all stay inside, but I see the familiar glint of reflected light on binoculars. I wish I had anything like a full field agent's gear kit, but this simple high-powered monocular is quite a bit better than nothing. Through its lens, I can see the shadowed form of a pilot-shaped figure in the plane's cabin. Can't yet tell if that's a living human being, an inflatable dummy, or something else, but it at least takes up space, and it looks like it's moving its arms at the plane's controls. I lose the plane al-

together for a moment when it goes into a very steep dive, its white roof blending into the morning glare, and then pick it up again mere dozens of feet above the desert. The drones follow it in tight spirals.

On their next round of shots, the drones score a whole succession of hits. Now the plane is definitely smoking. The pilot steers closer to the ground and begins a gradual turn to line up with the highway—he's going to try a landing on the road, I realize. The Man in White and his flunkies realize it, too, and all of them but their driver get out of their car. Dark lenses cover their eyes, while their light suits all take on a rosy glow as direct dawn light strikes us all. Peculiar halos surround the sun, as though the sunlight's passing through particulates or crystals high in the atmosphere or somewhere beyond. Given the situation, it may well be. The plane gleams in rainbow hues all along its upper surfaces as it swoops down lower.

Landing a plane is one of those moments of absolute distinction. It's in the air; then it isn't. It may admittedly bounce a time or two, but that's just oscillation along the boundary. There's a clarity of definition in flight that I find appealing in the midst of disordered circumstances like these. The peculiar lighting fades as the sun rises higher, so the plane regains its white hue as it angles over the dusty black asphalt. Eddies of dust and sand kick up as the landing gear reaches down toward ground. Bump, bump, slide, and the plane is rolling smoothly due west, ahead of us. I get out of my car now and pull out the portable

chair I've been using. The Man in White and his guys stay where they are.

For a moment I've forgotten the drones. The pilot of that plane hasn't. He jumps out—out of the passenger side, not the pilot's side—well before the plane can come to a stop, with a final tug of the wheel to send the plane careening off the road at nearly a right angle. The drones get off more bursts at the plane, and whatever they're firing has quite a punch. Depleted uranium slugs perhaps, or something of the sort. The engine starts smoking badly and fluids spew from half a dozen punctured hoses. I strongly doubt that plane's ever taking off again. Once it's taken care of, the drones spin around to fire at the pilot.

And he calls out my name. "Bill! It's Nicolas Rudenault!"

I will be dipped in shit. What on earth is my old buddy Cyborg Nick doing here, quite a few thousand miles away from his old stomping grounds in Luxembourg? But that voice and gait, alternating sprint and long-distance running steps, add up to an unmistakable combination. Assuming that Nicolas is still my friend, and I don't have any reason to suspect otherwise right now, I draw my gun and get a bead on the nearer of the drones. It hasn't designated me as a target yet, so it goes down easy with four bullets in its carapace and rotors while Nicolas tumbles and weaves out of the other drone's line of fire.

My actions set up a classic conflict-of-assessments glitch in the remaining drone. Its guns swing back and forth between Nicolas and me. Now, this is basic stuff in real-time combat programming, and

wouldn't ordinarily be an issue at all. Script kiddies playing on the Internet can solve this kind of thing, let alone the Union's remote unit development teams. I suspect that the physical chaos I've been noticing is interfering with the basic circuitry. Whatever the cause, the effect is one Nicolas and I manage to exploit quite well with a simple 3:2 harmonic in our rates of fire. The drone's soon toast. The plane grinds to a halt, still smoking, and he runs toward me.

Now the goon squad goes into action. If this were a movie, bullets would be pinging off the pavement all around me while I wheel toward safety. In practice, these guys know quite a bit about aiming, and the bullets whiz *past* me rather than down below me. In about three bounds, Nicolas draws alongside me and then passes right over me. At least two bullets smack into his back with the distinctive *ting* of lead against impact-resistant plastic. He lands on his feet firing, and the goons withdraw to the shelter of car doors. It doesn't do them much good. Nicolas can carry much larger caliber weapons than they can, and he can fire his faster than they can fire theirs, and he can just plain move faster than them. By the time he jumps over the driver's side door and lands on the chest of the Man in White, he's got no living opposition left. They were all down in his initial volley; the rest was just him making sure.

He pauses to catch his breath, leaning on the sedan's hood. That kind of exertion does take its toll even with all his metabolic enhancements. I check myself and the chair for signs of serious damage, then wheel up alongside. "Thanks, Nicolas. So what brings you to New Mexico?"

I should know better than to hand him that sort of a line. He grins broadly. "That plane over there, of course." A Nicolas grin is an impressive thing, because his skin stops about where an average man's hairline would be. Above and behind that, his skull's been replaced by layers of plastic and circuitry. A hat would cover it, but he doesn't have one on. The muscles beneath his remaining organic areas are attached to posts within the synthetic replacements, and you can see them move when he makes broad expressions of any sort. It would look like something out of a horror movie if it were bloody; as it is, it's got a peculiar fascination for me. "Before that, a bigger plane."

"Smartass," I answer with a smaller smile. He loves the American colloquialisms, for reasons that remain obscure to me.

"What brings *you* here, then?" I'd forgotten his penchant for turning questions back on questioners. This retort of his brings it all back to me.

"That van," I say, "and other cars before it. But unlike you, I'll give the rest of the answer." He leans forward, his face full of obvious curiosity. I point at the Man in White. "They decided I was a security risk, and then I had the unmitigated gall to survive a facility-destroying disaster, and since then I've been on the target list. I'm guessing from your pursuit that you must have run into something similar."

"Oh yes. I also had the misfortune to be the only survivor of a terror attack on our North Sea marine analysis platform, and the security force decided that I must thus be implicated. At first I

went blindly, but then I decided that if I were going to perish, I might as well indulge a little bit of curiosity on my way out."

"And that brought you to New Mexico?" I'm baffled.

"Oh yes." He's clearly waiting for me to ask.

"All right, Nicolas. Tell me. What brought you to New Mexico, in particular?"

"Roswell!" Another big face-stretching grin.

I make a sour face. "You're looking for fucking little gray men?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. I've seen enough of the files on genuine extraterrestrials to know that that's just popular madness and the superstition of crowds. I just want to know what really is there, behind the Union defenses you and I both know are there."

"Hmm," I say, marking time as I think about it. "Ah, what the hell? It's not like there's really anything interesting waiting for me in Los Angeles. Get in." Five minutes later we're heading back east.

## ROBERT

I spend the next while wandering in a trance. I have only the dimmest memories of the Rubbish guiding me, seeing to it that I eat and sleep when I must and keeping me from doing anything like wandering out into the middle of the road. How long the trance is, I'm not sure, though I have the impression that at least part of the wandering takes place in the spirit world, where time is more negotiable even when the universe isn't about to end.

When I come to again, I find myself thinking about "myself" and a lot of the implications and inferences tied up in it. There is significance in our experiences with the magi and the Red Star that I doubt my comrades would think of. The Technocrat is the slave of his worldview; if he thinks about multiplicity of soul, it will only be in the context of neuropathology, or networking, or something like that. He's likely to regard numerical symbolism either as reflections of simple defects in human perception or as manifestations of a physical structure that has no meaningful connection to human awareness. But the universe is neither a derangement nor unliving, whatever he might think. The Chinese woman might pick up on some of the significance a lot faster, but then she's likely to incorporate it into her own cultural matrix, and it's clear to me that what's happening to us now is well beyond the boundaries of any single culture.

It takes two items in a set to establish identity: this, and the thing that is not this. The other. It takes three to break the stalemate and suggest the possibilities for growth. There's Hegel's thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but that's not the only show in town. There's the Christian formulation of the eternal Father, the eternal Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeding eternally from both, and there are indeed spiritual unions that work like that. There's the trinity of fundamental powers—creation, stability, and destruction or chaos. Three is the smallest number of a system.

So what's the system of those three magi, I ask myself as I stroll along some unfamiliar state high-

way, heading generally north. I cast some questions out into the ethereal realm where answers take on tangible form. I can't travel well there myself, but I can ask the bat and mosquito spirits to search on my behalf, offering blood to the mosquitoes and captured bugs (not including the mosquitoes) to the bats. I know vaguely that Porthos is important in the Order of Hermes' history, but the others were strangers to me.

How about myself and the other two living ones, then? I'm not a child and Ming is not a crone, but I believe that William is older than me, and Ming older than him. Young adulthood, adulthood, adulthood shading into old age, perhaps? For all my professed (and real) independence, I am on some level part of the Nine Traditions. William is a member of the Technocratic Union. Does Ming stand in for the families of independent magicians? We come perilously close to being a microcosm of those who work with awakened will in the modern day....

I wonder if there are other trines like ours. We might, after all, be subjects in a cosmic experiment: take three, mix, see what happens, compare to the results of giving similar treatment to another three. I don't know how I'd go about hunting for such trios, though, and if there is anyone performing that kind of experiment, my duty is presumably to be most fully myself.

There are constant stirrings in the fields to each side of the road—animals, and things less thoroughly material. It feels like the Gauntlet's weakening. Small spirits push across it and ride

small animals. Occasionally, larger spirits gust through, flap around like insects trying to get out of a summer house at night, and either do manage to return or fall asleep to wait for more favorable circumstances. It's a strange sort of company, but the vitality of it all renews my own sense of engagement with life after that second encounter with the Red Star and those ghastly ruins. It's very hard to think of all this passing soon, but at least I get to enjoy it before it does. The passing spirits give an extra sheen to it all, like rainbows in the midst of summer storms. It's a good feeling.

Sometimes I hear cars in the distance, but none of them come near me for several hours. Each one turns off on a side road, or turns out to be running along a parallel road off on the horizon, or whatever. I wish the drivers well, and hope that they'll get the chance to accomplish something significant in the time they have left.

## MING XIAN

I make one final trip to the place where my ancestors gathered. There's a quiet week when my assistants and a few volunteers can handle the work, and when the natural world is working relatively naturally. In the middle of the week, with all the omens indicating some continued calm, I pack my gear and make the drive up into the mountains again.

There were storms from out of the desert last week, including acrid waste-laden clouds of choking dust stirred up from the dying lakes and

rivers far to the west. But a day of hard rain settled most of that, and I have only momentary distractions from the polluted remains as I go. I do notice how much of the region's been quietly depopulated. It's a tidy emptiness, because the Uygurs take pride in their tools even in dire extremes, and it wouldn't stand out to someone who wasn't already familiar with the area. But I see fields and orchards left untended too long, and land that would be prime pasture filled with grass knee-high or even taller. Neither machinery nor livestock have been there to cut it down. Some of those people have thronged into the cities like Urumqi. Others, I think, are scattering into the wilderness or wandering east, hoping to find sanctuary among other peoples and larger populations. When I do pass farmers or herders, I make a point of greeting them, letting them know that at least one person sees their labor and appreciates it.

Two landslides have dumped massive rocks across my way into the mountains. Fortunately for me, I remembered to choose one of the better four-wheel-drive trucks available to me in Urumqi, and I make my way very carefully over the debris. I see that the road beyond is altogether undisturbed except for animal tracks. As the world draws to its close, it seems we human beings are drawn together.

Finally I reach the clearing where I customarily begin the ritual journey. The wall between flesh and yin feels so thin here that I call out to my ancestors right where I stand, lighting a stick of incense for each name I speak. In just a few

minutes, the chill wind carries back answers. At least a few of my ancestors come to me.

"What news?" I ask upon completing the initial formalities. Their answers don't come to me in words, though, but in a flood of static images and complex sounds. Terrible things stir again in the depths of the yin realms, and they cling as closely as they can to the material world. But the wall of the world is also dangerous: sometimes it flickers out momentarily, and a few of my ancestors have been swept across and imprisoned in mortal forms they cannot control. Whether they remain aware of themselves after that, my other ancestors cannot say, but they certainly find the exclusion both dangerous and uncomfortable.

"Have you no words for me?" Another flood of imagery. There is an ancestral tongue of the ghosts, but they're having difficulty speaking it. I can't really grasp the reasons they give, since it's difficult to convey logic without words. They retain meaning within their individual minds, but the currents of yin seem no longer sufficient to carry the distinctions they wish to make, like an ice sculpture melting in the summer sun.

"What is my duty to you now?" At least that's what I intend to ask, but when I get to "my," my ancestors surround me with meanings of their own again. The imagery is peculiar, full of branching trees and rising tornados. Gradually I realize what they mean to tell me. It's always been the case that we few able to communicate clearly with our ancestors have been special in their affections. They generally love or at least care

about all their living descendants, but those of us who can stand within and across the wall of the world matter most. That's now changing. All of their descendants seem to blur together in their thoughts: mediums and the spirit-deaf, living and dead, Chinese and intermarried. I see images of distant cousins I would never have suspected, many of them neither looking at all Chinese nor aware of their Chinese heritage. The very notion of "family" in any meaningful sense blurs into an awareness of humanity as a whole. It is a powerful vision in its own terms, a perspective much like what the emperors of old must have had when they saw All Under Heaven spread before their throne. But it is little help to me now.

"Why..." I don't even get the next question clearly formulated in my own mind before a fresh torrent of my ancestors' thoughts wraps itself around me. This time it's not just their thoughts, I realize. This is their essence. They are dispersing all around me, the yin force that has held them together draining out of the world and their mental processes dispersing back into the primal Way from which all consciousness originated. For a moment I think that they're completing the process of death that was suspended by their emergence as ghosts, but it lacks... the emotions, the *feeling* of death. They are not so much ceasing to be anything as ceasing to be distinct. In a moment I am again alone in the little clearing. I will rest before I drive back home.

## WILLIAMI

The almanac built into Nicolas' hip says that Roswell has a population of forty-five-thousand people. It's obviously way below that now. At a guess, or rather at an informed but necessarily hasty situation appraisal, we agree that at least half the buildings stand empty. Albuquerque was obviously full beyond capacity when we passed through it. We agree that the mundane population is probably flocking to major cities all over the world, seeking mutual defense or just plain companionship.

Nicolas asks me what I've been up to since we last talked, at a network planning conference six years ago. I tell him, with an emphasis on the last few weeks. He ponders it all, asks me some questions about details, and then rambles in fits and starts. "It's so damnably typical of the world, really."

"Eh? What's typical about the end of the world?"

"Frustrated ambitions, of course." He gestures down at his cybernetic ankles and feet. Marvels of design, they are immensely functional and also intensely beautiful, with curves reminiscent of Art Deco. "These were going to be the prototypes for the next generation of concealable multi-function lower limb prosthetics. The last generation will—would—be released to the public next year, and whole classes of leg damage would become entirely fixable. And it goes like that with every single piece of this gear, and with a whole lot else that I had to leave behind."

To my great surprise and distinct alarm, he pounds on the dashboard with both fists. Even without kicking in any significant augmentation, he's got the strength to punch finger-sized chunks out of the plastic, and he comes perilously close to setting off the airbag. "Damn it all!" he shouts, his usual cynical amusement shattered. "Why now?" Slowly he cools down, or at least restrains himself a little better. "Every single generation of humanity before this one got to live out its time and die, and entertain any old notion of what the future might hold. Why do *we* get this foisted on us?"

I shake my head. "I wish I knew. It's not like it even makes sense. It's all very well for someone like Moorcock to write about the depletion of entropy, or Ballard to go on with his various bits, but there's no science to it that I can figure out. If not for feeling obliged to think of anyone capable of pushing a universe over as some sort of God, I'd wonder if it were deliberately induced."

Nicolas spits out the window. "Yes. Very few things are so good for creeping dread as the sense that the universe has gone as crazy as our bosses."

Roswell itself is a pretty typical Southwestern town. It's not really in desert, but the land here is dry and it takes a lot of irrigation. There's a railroad station surrounded by warehouses and silos for the agricultural produce, the products of the local mines, and so on. And then there are the stores that cater to the tourist trade, with more clichéd renderings of aliens than the human brain can rightly accommodate. There don't seem to be many tourists around when we ar-

rive, but there are some. Not everyone feels the general dread, it seems, and not all of those who do choose to heed its warnings. So we're far from the only strangers in town.

We have a destination of our own. Fifteen miles east of Roswell proper, there's a cluster of buildings purporting to be an agricultural research center. (Someone in charge of planning was apparently a little too fond of Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain*, which used the same sort of gag. Living in someone else's fandom is a little annoying sometimes.) In fact it's one of the deepest of deep dark Union secrets, home to something altogether mysterious. Nicolas and I both know that there are extraterrestrial races, some of them with advanced civilizations; this isn't something the Union is prepared to tell the public, but when you deal in exotic threats (like me) or the commercial application of exotic technology (like Nicolas), you learn these things. So what could be there that the Union doesn't want us to know even after we know that aliens are real?

As we drive, Nicolas speculates. "I used to know a lady in Geneva who was sure that it was a time machine," he tells me. "She said that the past is changing all the time but that we don't notice it. Eventually the time travelers would wipe out all resistance and we'd live in a glorious perfect eternity." He thinks about it. "Maybe they screwed it up somehow."

"That's... hmm. I started to say that that's ridiculous, but then this whole situation is ridiculous."

"It is," he agrees, "but not in quite that way, I think. I sometimes think that whatever it is actu-

ally isn't very important or astounding, but someone in the Inner Circle *thinks* it is, and who's to contradict them?"

That makes me laugh. "That's stupid enough to be true."

We turn off the main road onto a well-maintained side road that runs a half-mile or so to Roswell Base, as most of the inter-convention memos refer to it. Unfortunately, when we crest the last hill before the base, we see that we're unlikely to get a lot of useful answers. It's been blasted flat. Looks like something exploded directly overhead, or perhaps like that foot from the opening credit for Monty Python episodes descended on it. Nothing remains more than a story high, and not much of that. We don't see any bodies, at least from this distance, but there's certainly no sign of human activity.

"Want to go down for a closer look?" I ask. I'm not sure I want to, and half hope he'll say no.

"I've come this far," he says immediately. "I need to go the last few meters." So we drive on down, parking in the middle of a lot free of other cars. Close up, I can see small clumps of parts and leaked fluids that may well mark where cars were when whatever it was happened. The lot itself seems sound, uncracked, so I'm not too worried about falling into a pit or anything like that.

It occurs to me as I get out that I'm really fucking tired of dealing with ruins. The ruin of my place in Ragnarok, those ruins on Mars, and now this. It's wearying and depressing. I could do with fewer inappropriate silences, too, places where there ought to be voices but aren't. I do my best to fill it

up with a steady stream of comments and speculations, and Nicolas does the same, but we are only two men in a place made for hundreds. "You'd think they could at least have left a note," I add at one point.

Not long thereafter, there is a sound, though not from within the base. Someone's driving along the same road we took. Nicolas and I can't do anything about the van, but we can and do hide ourselves to wait and see what's going on.

## ROBERT

As I approach the mental hospital where I began my calling, the air seems thicker with something like mist. It takes me a little while to realize that it's not in the atmosphere, but just beyond it, swirling within the Gauntlet itself. It's not something I usually see in a mass like this. It's unborn souls seeking incarnation.

Most souls not yet born are very vaguely defined. They have a legacy from their parents and all their ancestors, both within the species and in all its predecessors, but they haven't yet had time to develop personalities of their own. Even the reincarnated ones aren't terribly complex at that stage; the traits that pass on from one lifetime to the next are much simpler than the accumulated weight of details within a lifetime. Very occasionally you might see one better developed than that, the soul of a particularly powerful magician or someone blessed with unusual protection from rites performed at or not long before death.

This throng, though, includes a great many of those better-developed souls. It's like... I catch myself. Of course it's not a matter of like, it's a matter of is. These are all the souls in the world (well, in this little corner of it) capable of rebirth, hoping for one last chance in flesh before the show ends. I haven't seen many babies lately, but the competition must be fierce and ugly. I'll be very unsurprised if I learn that legends of changelings are gaining in popularity. Desperate souls, many of them lacking in much of anything you'd want to call moral depth, may try all sorts of schemes to claim the bodies they want.

The road swings from due north to nearly east, taking a jog around some property the road builders couldn't secure for their own. Just around the bend, a woman stands right on the yellow line. She's about my age, I think, better tanned than I am, with ragged brown hair and good hiking gear. She's exhausted, I think, teetering on the brink of collapse; I put on a little extra speed so that I can catch her if she falls.

"Excuse me," I call out as I approach. "I don't mean to intrude, but you look like you need some help."

She gets as far as "I...." Then she does waver and sag, and I have to run to keep her from hitting her head on the pavement. Cradling her, I sit down on the road, hoping that no car chooses this moment to drive our way. She's light, but not starved or anything like that. It's just that she's in good shape and lightly built in the first place. The Rubbish rustles along the edges of the road, keeping an eye out for both

material and spiritual threats. The fog of seeking souls doesn't draw too near. Apparently neither she nor I are good candidates for providing soulless bodies for anyone else to use.

A few minutes later, she struggles back to consciousness. "I... did I fall?" She turns her head to look at me, and I see that her eyes are a bright blue dimmed by sheer fatigue to a watery hue that's almost gray. She doesn't match my own standards of beauty very thoroughly, but she's got an honesty of expression that's appealing in its own way. I don't think she's going to try to bullshit me about whatever it is she's up to, and I decide to be honest in reply.

"Yes, you did. I was walking along just as you started to faint. That was about five minutes ago. You weren't all the way unconscious, but you weren't responsive to the outside world." I smile. "My name's Robert. Robert Blanclege. I'm heading up north to visit some old friends."

"Maria," she says after a moment. "The rest doesn't matter." I can see fear rising over her head like the air over hot pavement. I also see a faint light within her that might be the beginning of awakening, and I decide that I owe her the effort it may take to make sure that she doesn't end like the man whose head filled with black sludge or any of the other tragedies I've seen lately.

I shake her hand, the absurd formality bringing a brief smile to her face. "Pleased to meet you. Do you have any particular destination?" A fraction of a second later I curse myself for the question, as she breaks out crying. "I'm sorry," I add hastily,

"please don't think you have to answer that question. We can wait here for a while, in any event."

"No, it's okay," she says. "Okay, no, it's not, but my talking or not talking about it won't make any difference." She's got just a touch of a Latin American accent. I feel pretty comfortable guessing that her family immigrated to the US when she was still a child, and that she has or had until recently relatives who never really mastered English. "There was only one place I wanted to go, and it's gone now."

"Do you want to tell me about it? I'm pretty good at listening." I shift my weight slightly. "But maybe we could move off the road first."

"Huh? Oh! Yes, yes." She makes a good effort to stand, and I try not to let it show just how much help I have to give her for it to work. As she walks, I see that she's got a slight limp. And blood spilling out of the top of her left boot. I'm going to have to attend to that. We do manage the dozen or so steps, and then sit down again, resting more comfortably on lawn that was mowed not too many days ago.

As she catches her breath, I point at her bloody boot. "I can take care of that, if you want."

She looks down. "If you can, please."

I gently stretch out her leg horizontally, putting a rolled-up spare shirt of mine under her knee to help support it. Then I can get a better look at her boot. Turns out that there's... what the hell? There's a silver nail, or something much like it, driven through the sole near the heel. I'm astounded that she can manage to walk. "How on earth did you get anywhere with this?"

"I had to." A simple enough answer.

"I don't mean motive," I say. "I mean physical feasibility. This must hurt like hell, and you can deal with that if you need to. But it must be doing terrible things to muscles or ligaments in there. I don't see quite how you can walk on it."

"It's not what you think," she tells me.

"Oh?"

"Take a look." So I take the invitation and do. I unlace the boot as carefully as I can. She's got good thick hiking socks on, and I peel the sock off, too. Now the nail head and a quarter inch of its shaft lay open for my examination. She's right. It's not what I think. It's not a nail at all, I see. The shaft is almost as fine as wire, while the head isn't a real nail head, it's the broken tip of something larger, flattened out mostly by her stepping on it again and again.

"You see," she says.

"I see it, but I don't understand it, Maria. What is this?"

"It was part of something like a fan. There were these silver pieces, and silk or something stretched between them. It shouldn't have been any good as a weapon, but the beast with it sliced through everything it swung at."

I want to press her for more, but I'm sure it would be a bad idea to do so. "I see. Is it safe to come out, do you think?"

She shrugs. "No idea. Give it a try, please."

So I do, washing my hands in a little pool of standing water and praying for protection for the task. At first it seems like the shaft won't budge at all, then it moves out smoothly. She leans forward to press another old shirt against the exit wound.

There are five or six inches of bloody silver wire here, humming with a remarkable power. I touch it... and then I realize what's happened, even as she struggles to explain some more.

"It was morning," she tells me. "We were getting set up for a family picnic, over there." She waves somewhere off to the east. I don't need to know the details. "The sky turned icy silver, and these *things* tumbled out of thin air. They were... they were..."

"Werewolves," I suggest.

Now her shock clears some more, and she gives me a startled look. "Yes. But how?"

"I'll tell you later," I promise. "Tell me the rest now. Draw out the story like the nail, and we can close up all the wound at once."

I see that she doesn't trust me so much any more, but she does continue. "These... werewolves. One of them had the fan thing. They laid into us, I don't know why. I saw all of my family killed just like that. They would have killed me, too. I was leaning back, and slipped, and so the thing hit my foot rather than my chest. I felt the spike break off, as I slid down into a culvert. They let me be while they tossed the bodies around. Then they were gone, and the sky was back, and I don't know why."

It's a hard lesson for modern people to learn. In addition to the purely disembodied spirits I deal with (and that most shamans do), there are hybrid creatures, part animal, part human, part spirit, who can move through the realms more or less as they wish. They're as dangerous and different as the meanest spirits out there, preda-

tors on the fringes of human society and awareness. Did one of Maria's relatives give them offense? Could the picnic ground be turf they claim as holy? The werewolves have immensely complicated taboo systems, and it might take me quite a while to learn anything useful even if I had one of them right here and willing to talk. "Maria, listen to me." I don't intrude too closely on her grief, but I do hand her one of my hankies for her tears. "You've run into one of the secret sides of the world, and it's a terrible thing, but your life can continue."

"It..." Sobs rack her in sharp waves. "They..."

"Yes," I agree. "It's like a nightmare let loose in daylight. Do you have a faith, a creed?"

The question disorients her. "What? I... no, I suppose. My parents are... were..." She can't finish the thought just now, and I don't push that one at all.

"If they had bothered talking to you, the werewolves would say that they guard the earth against its enemies, and have a story about your family's sins. But they'd be right only in the light of your own taboos. The first thing you need to know is that this is not a judgment on you for anything that a wise or good human being should consider wrong." That's a bit of a gamble, admittedly, but her soul seems clean enough to me that I'm willing to take the risk. "This was a tragedy, a terrible tragedy, and as unrelated to you as a person as a car accident would be."

"But how can such things be?" A sensible enough question. "What the hell kind of world is this?"

I think about how to proceed. "A strange and sick one," I tell her. "Strange enough to include werewolves, sick enough to be unable to keep them from slaughtering innocents. And full of many more sorrows and mysteries, along with all the things you already knew about."

"What can I *do* about it?"

"Quite a lot, it turns out." I smile again. "There are spirits willing to serve and ways to use their power to serve you rather than prey on you."

She frowns. "That sounds like shamanism bullshit."

"Half right."

"Huh?"

"It is shamanism. It's just not bullshit." Time to take another gamble. I look away from her to see where my totem is. "Rubbish, show yourself to her."

"Um, I've seen trash," she objects.

"Yes, but in this case Rubbish is a name rather than a description. Look there," I point. The Rubbish pulls itself into the outline of a human being lying on the ground, with a more detailed face. The face smiles.

Damn, I've pushed too far. Maria shrieks and falls back. "No, no, no," she repeats while shaking her head vigorously.

I take her hand. "Yes, Maria. Yes. You have it within you to become a living weapon against those who'd attack people like your relatives. It takes time and practice, but if you're willing to travel with me, I can teach you as I go."

She looks east for a long time, while the spirits swirl around us. "All right. I don't believe a word of it, but then it's a strange time, isn't it?" I nod but

don't speak, not wanting to interrupt her thoughts right now. "I can certainly listen, and I don't have anywhere else to go."

"We'll let you rest a little while longer and be on our way, then," I say. "But first let's get your foot bandaged more properly."

## WILLIAM

The car we hear approaching crests the last hill and proves to be something less than an entirely reassuring sight, because there's nobody driving it. It's a jeep with an automatic-navigation system and the all-weather housing for a limited AI strapped into the driver's seat. We sometimes use such things on guard duties when manpower is sufficiently scarce. That someone was around to set it up is, as far as it goes, a good sign, but it'd be nice to see a driver in it now.

It doesn't display any obvious big weaponry. The somewhat alarming-looking package resting in the passenger seat is a sensor array. I've installed units like it myself, and Nicolas has actually designed some for the exotic environments his unit studies. Used to study. Dammit, whenever I get used to the reality of the losses we're facing, something comes along to make it fresh. Anyway, we know what's going on. It's checking us for Union identification and performing basic biometric evaluation to see if we're the people our ID describes. We are, so as soon as the scan finishes, the jeep pulls up along aside us and parks, its engine still running.

The speech synthesizer on board is basic, by our standards, which is to say that it has full dy-

namics and inflection but sounds like someone's speaking through a cold. Years ahead of anything that anyone outside the Union has, of course, but years behind for us. Its presence in this rig is one more sign of how jury-rigged the whole contraption is. "Agents, you are not authorized for operations in this area, but the chain of command for violation review is inactive. Please state the nature of your business."

I start to say something, but Nicolas is much faster on his feet with this sort of thing. "We came here because of the inactivity in our chains of command. We assumed, apparently wrongly, that higher-priority facilities like this one would escape the petty problems afflicting our units. Is there anyone of independent volition here to whom we can report?"

We program units like this with a delay slightly longer than an average human being requires to respond to an unexpected request, for psychological reasons. The actual computation happens far faster than a human could process anything, of course. But we found that when the AI answers too quickly, the humans who have to work with it feel consistently intimidated. The slowdown lets users feel like they're the equal of or slightly superior to the AI when it comes to authority to act on whatever matter's being discussed. Even though I know all this, it works on me just as well as it does on anyone else. I gain a bit of confidence simply because the AI waits for a noticeable fraction of a second before saying, "No, there are no human beings left in this facility."

Nicolas continues in his best command manner. "Brief us."

The AI makes another of its submissive pauses before calling up a hologram of the facility and environs. This obviously incorporates stock stored details with images culled out of real-time observations from the recent past—yesterday, I think, judging from the clouds. I remember those looming thunderheads that dissolved before delivering any rain. Men and women go about their business around the various buildings. An overlay shows power consumption. "For full access, verify Ragnarok status."

I motion with one hand to Nicolas to keep quiet, and reel off a pair of passwords and code phrases. The AI asks, "Why does the other visitor not identify himself?"

Fortunately, we have protocols for that. "My colleague is under temporary authorization and stored in the files only at specific facilities. I am using my command rights to cover him. Review the Temporary Authorization Protocols Addendum."

The AI does just that. "Verified. Building B, marked here in red, was dedicated to research into fundamental force manipulation. Its staff had best results in gravity wave generation and focus, relying in part on devices captured during the 1984 and 1986 Lunar raids. Please indicate if you need clarification at this time." It pauses. We keep quiet. Neither of us wants to follow the endless network of cross-references possible for this kind of thing. "Proceeding. The gravity wave sheet was scheduled to replace a variety of independently developed

small-scale anti-gravity systems, pending the outcome of a large-scale trial scheduled to begin yesterday."

The image flickers briefly, and a time marker shows that we're watching data from yesterday playing out at four times actual speed. "Something went wrong." Most AIs have limited rhetorical capability, and I'm sure that this one means to report in a straightforward manner. It certainly reeks of sarcasm, though. The power diagram shows a whole cascade of sudden surges, originating deep inside the building rather than coming in from outside. I guess, silently for the moment, that it was just one of those bits of quantum-mechanical chaos that I've seen so much of lately. Unfortunately, the net effect is to power up the gravity wave generators while under-powering the regulator and focus mechanisms. So...

"Here," the AI says while adding some more overlays, "you may see the emergence of multiple layers of polarized gravity operating more or less in parallel." Indeed we can: it's like watching a building-sized sandwich blow up. Alternating strata become too heavy and too light, the light ones exploding out sideways while the heavy ones collapse as if they were suddenly on Jupiter. "Notice the particular problems with organic material in this environment." It magnifies the area right around a doorway. "The subjects' major proteins all unfolded and rapid dissolution into inorganic components followed." That's one way of putting it, yes. The process looks uncomfortably similar to what I saw on Mars.

"Thank you," Nicolas remarks as we walk around the hologram, studying replays with various combinations of overlay added and subtracted.

"Certainly," the AI replies. "I am glad that there are human agents on hand to observe phase two."

What the hell? "Please explain phase two," I direct as calmly as I can.

"One of the goals of this experiment was the measurement of effects on human physiology of this sort of gravity manipulation. The destruction of the facility made this goal unattainable. The directing AIs have therefore settled on a new test site and are in the process of relocating the necessary equipment."

"What test site did you settle on?"

"Roswell, central district." The AI can't sound agitated or gloating, of course. That must be me projecting.

"And you wish us to watch from some designated safe distance." Nicolas isn't asking.

"That's correct," the AI agrees. "We have prepared a short roster of such locales in the hope that qualified observers would present themselves before the first triggering."

I take over the responses. "What measures have you taken to see that there's no repetition of the phase one surge problem?"

The AI gives me an extremely long answer, which boils down to something not far from "We hope a lot and our hearts are pure so it can't be a problem."

Nicolas and I don't even bother exchanging glances. "As the ranking operative of the Technocratic Union, with special authority via Project Ragnarok," I address it, "I order the immediate end to phase two preparations and their indefinite suspension pending review by a competent board of

examiners constituted under the Protocols for External Validation. Confirm and transmit." I add the trio of codes required to back that up.

"Negative," the AI replies, and now the social-reinforcement delay is gone. "You lack standing to order such action, and I am unable to obtain secondary confirmation of your status. You will be treated as an unreliable operative. If you attempt to interfere with phase two, you will be restrained by such force as the affected units deem necessary. That is all." With that, the jeep turns around and drives off.

Now Nicolas and I do stare at each other, and at the ruins, and at the dust cloud of the receding jeep, and back at each other. "I think we've got to do something about this," I say, and he nods.

"I can go cross-country," he points out. "I've got a reading on that unit's output and can scan as I go. You get your van set up to receive my transmissions. Let's get these things identified and see about putting a stop to them." As soon as he sees me nod, he jumps up and runs off at what must be at least forty kilometers an hour, jumping over barriers with amazingly fluid grace. The silver segments in his feet gleam in the desert sun, reminding me of what this is about. The world deserves its chance to be so beautifully glorious, even if that requires a lot of effort from ugly gimps like me.

## DANTE

As the universe becomes increasingly disordered, I make more of an effort to maintain my own local coherence. The force with which I merged, back when I left my body and entered

the realm beyond time, is itself changing unpredictably. It feels less itself and more an integral component of something else, so that any effort to draw specifically on the power of transnormal connection and non-local causality or identity becomes enmeshed with everything else—the soul, matter, the raw essence of magic, and all the rest. I am repeatedly flung out of my precarious union and back into a single self, for seconds or even minutes at a time.

In these moments of transition, just when I slip into or out of union with the power I served, I'm acutely aware of various figures I've encountered in my "time" here where symbols live. Several times (and how strange it is to again have "several times" as an entirely meaningful description), I see visions of that triad I encountered before learning of the impending judgment myself. I remember their gaining extra avatars and how they spent those avatars to retain life, and I wonder what else fate may have in store for them. They are physically separate again, but it feels to me like they have some future together yet to come.

## MING XIAN

The seasons are no longer reliable, but it feels like early autumn when all the factories far away from urban centers burn over the course of four days. Someone or something started the fires, but the local investigators find no leads. Rumor blames orbital weaponry, inhuman arsonists out to take over the world and exterminate humanity, the CIA, and other objects of fetishistic obsession. The day after the last of the fires start, a sudden torrent of warm

and reeking rain extinguishes them. The day after that, the shadow creatures begin preying on the people I guard.

These are, judging from the accounts of the survivors in my clinic, much like the hungry ghost that stalked me through the underworld. Indeed, at first I think it's just that thing come again. It may be, but there's also more at work. There are at least three of the shadow beasts, and possibly two or three times that many. They do not speak, and they show little sense of strategy. They're drawn toward living beings, whom they engulf and suck dry. Once they've fed, they become sluggish and withdraw into some dark corner, which is the only reason anyone in the vicinity of one of their attacks manages to survive.

On the second day of the things' reign of terror, I decide that I must do something about it. My ancestors may no longer answer my prayers and invocations, but there are rites of protection that depend on the very elements, and while the world becomes ever more disordered, it's not yet *that* disordered. I can gird myself with the vigor of fire, the purity of metal, the wisdom of water, the endurance of earth, and the resilience of wood, after an afternoon's meditations. None of it shows, of course, rather to the disappointment of the young medical intern who helps with the rites. He wanted to see me become some sort of cinematic special effect, I think, and lacks the capacity to see the changes in my aura.

A row of abandoned warehouses runs alongside the oldest of the rail lines in this district, and I decide to begin my search there. There haven't been

Still it fails to realize the threat of my outer ring of force.

Finally I'm ready. I spin my hands in the opposite direction from the way I've been moving them since this battle began. My inner ring shoots outward, pushing the composite creature back, back, back right into the outer ring. The cry of pain this time is far louder in my soul than any of the ones before, and I know that I'm likely to pass out in mere seconds. The creature tries to pull apart for ease in flight, but the elemental powers melt the individual entities back together as fast as they can separate. Finally the thing has but one choice left, and takes it. It folds itself down and out of the living world, back into the yin realm. Before it goes, it manages to form a single word out of the passing gusts:

"Revenge...."

With that, I do collapse, and don't recover until an hour later, back in the clinic.

## ROBERT

We talk as we walk. With each passing day, Maria sees more of the spirit world, and I explain it to her as we go. She remains essentially skeptical—unfortunately blending together the monotheisms of her culture with misunderstandings of some of my own points—but she has a refreshing openness to evidence. That's rarer than it might seem, and I make a point of telling her about it.

She shows no affinity at all for any sort of totem. Three evenings in a row we embark on a simple quest for a spirit who might act as her

totem, and nothing happens. Well, that's not entirely true. We don't find any totem for her. We do find a spirit world in increasing disarray. The fragmentation of things continues, and now I find it offset not so much by any persistence of existing identities as by fusions and hybrids. There are many spirits that resemble the creations of folklore and mythology: forelegs of this, head of that, tail of the other. The unified speech of spirits is fragmenting, too, as new dialects emerge and disappear like lightning flashes in the midst of this cosmic storm, and without that, my rituals for instruction and binding are less than entirely reliable. Maria doesn't know all that, but she can sense my growing unease, and it's very much a mutual decision to abandon the idea of a vision quest for her, at least for now.

We also pick up acolytes. That surprises me. I never thought of myself as a particularly good teacher, and I certainly don't now. But here are these teens and young men and women, up to within a few years of my own age, all of them badly shocked by things they've seen while alone. They hear our conversation and come to follow us, not speaking but listening very attentively. Most of them lack identification; based on the few wallets and IDs I do get to examine, about half of those who come are locals, the other half outsiders like myself, and some of them have come cross-country. The Rubbish tries to help me, telling me, "They're frozen right beneath the skin. They thaw when you say warm things."

To be honest, I don't really want any responsibilities. I want to get my own soul in order

and meet my end as gracefully as I can, as late in the life of the universe as I can. If time weren't ending now, I'd be studying means of reincarnation and soul survival. Without any hope of that working, I do a lot of prayer and meditation, often flashing back to my Bible school childhood lessons as well as my training under Xoca and the others. I resent Maria, and even more resent those hapless silent others. But it's not my place to shoo them away. Everything that's happened to me since my higher soul awoke for the first time leads here: I am the healer of their wounds, their protector in the midst of spiritual wilderness, the one who interprets fate and strengthens the soul to respond to it. To forsake my traveling companions would be to forsake myself as well, and this is precisely what I'm trying not to do.

It doesn't help any that I sense an impending attack. Things stir in many shadows now, as Maria and at least some of the others well know, and mostly we move on by and leave the things to stir right where they are. But there's something that follows us, slipping along in dark places night by night, watching and studying us. I'd like to tell myself that it's here for Maria or one of the others, but I don't have the luxury of self-deception. It's stalking me, for reasons I can't yet begin to guess.

My own dreams are unremarkable, which is to say that they're filled with what are likely small omens, echoes from my past lives, and so on, but no more than has been usual for me. The Rubbish, on the other hand, is dreaming dreams that shake its whole being. As it sleeps, it takes

on new forms, sometimes turning into liquids or vapors which pour through chambers made from other parts of its being or from scraps in the immediate vicinity. Upon waking, it doesn't remember any of this, or at least it can't describe anything useful to me, so I have to watch and interpret on my own. Maria watches too, but she lacks the experience to evaluate the dreams in any terms other than the canons of psychotherapy, and it simply doesn't make much sense to treat an animated mound of garbage in the terms of nineteenth-century Europe or twentieth-century America.

As we approach the hospital, I notice more and more intrusions into the physical landscape from the spirit world. In particular, I see signs of the landscape I visited with Xoca when I made my own vision quest for a totem. That concerns me because it was a dangerous place: in an infinite junkyard, refrigerators fell from the sky, and the sun dripped blood as it cycled overhead in days that lasted just a few minutes each. I vividly remember Xoca looking at the landscape after he'd explained how vision questing led to places that revealed important truths about the quester, and saying to me, "You're real fucked up, aren't you?"

I was. In some ways I still am, but much less so. The work of healing my community brought me out of myself and into a healthier relationship with the world beneath community. I don't want to lose that now, and I really don't want to endanger the people I'm trying to take care of.

Some of the local spirits remember me and call out their greetings. We talk quietly, and I do what I can to keep them comfortable. They're

more aware of the impending end than material things seem to be, and have fewer options for self-deception and denial. Many of them simply want to tell their stories, seeking a pattern and perhaps even a meaning in the flow of their experiences so far, and wherever I feel I can, I listen. I teach Maria how to listen, and we spend several afternoons sitting at opposite ends of a circle of spirits, each one telling its story in turn and making way for another to come in. My mute followers can't see most of the spirits directly, and in any event lack the training for helpful interaction, so they take turns pacing the perimeter, maintaining defensive wards. Once something big and ugly, perhaps an early dinosaur's spirit, races across the spirit world's ground to blow up against the wards, and once something twisted and charred falls from the sky. It might be a piece of shattered moon bridge or something else; it is in any event not an auspicious sign.

On the night before we reach the mental hospital, a swarm of ghosts surrounds us. I know some of them: they're my fellow inmates, the ones who died in the hospital over the decades. I introduce Maria to as many of them as I can, and they bask in the intensity of her conflicted emotions. Her zealous curiosity, her battered skepticism, and her growing fear all provide sustenance to the ghosts, who after all depend on the renewal of their own passions to survive here at all. A few of the ghosts undergo a metamorphosis I've never seen before, fusing themselves with one or another of the would-be reincarnated avatars. Awakened ghosts? Such a thing doesn't

happen. I would have thought, before the apocalypse began, that it *couldn't* happen, and explain why at great length. Apparently, now those rules no longer apply, and so some of the seeking avatars happily leave us alone for their journeys to personal ascension via the roads of the dead. As the *Principia Discordia* says, "Thus indeed do many things come to pass."

## WILLIAM

I really loved spy flicks and action films of all kinds when I was a kid, and I never lost the taste as I grew up. One of the great pleasures for me of working in the Union was that while I couldn't physically do the weirdest stuff myself, I could get close to the guys and gals who could and work with them in making the sort of world where heroic stunts might be as commonplace as effective antibiotics or non-stick coatings.

So here I am, a paraplegic man in his forties, leaning out of a van speeding along at close to one hundred miles an hour, catching pieces of a disobedient artificial intelligence thrown to me by my cyborg companion. What a life, eh?

Nicolas caught up with the AI-driven jeep after about thirty minutes of chase, and I caught up with them both a few minutes after that. I was worried that the jeep might decide to go cross-country, where I'd have no chance to catch it. But I remembered that once one of these sentry vehicles is committed to relatively high speed, its threat evaluators will favor off-road travel only in response to quite extreme road perils. My van and I don't count.

As long as I chased it as fast as I could and Nicolas did the same, we would be okay.

Once I was in place, he started pulling at the restraining straps and instrumentation. He could have jumped on the jeep and gone right to work, but then the AI could also have electrified the whole frame, and that wouldn't be a very happy thing for a cyborg. So now, he has to cut off most or all of its ability to sense the outside world before he can do anything else. Hence this high-speed party game. I'm not sure that we'll need or want any of the pieces later, but why take chances? I make one-handed catches and throw the fruits of our labor into the passenger seat.

While that's going on, I'm also fiddling with the multi-spectrum tracker I cobbled together on the way here out of several GPS systems and odds and ends. Once I establish the frequencies the jeep's using, I can go looking for related activity. There turn out to be six fixed and two moving sources of encrypted traffic on the same frequencies, nicely framing downtown Roswell. If anything like what happened out at the research station applies, at least half the town's remaining people will die. And of course it could always get worse: a black hole, say, drifting from here down into the Earth (or vice versa, really). Not much fun to be had there, so I continue trying to be the best action-movie sidekick I can.

We're actually passing the Roswell town limits when Nicolas gets the AI fully unsecured. He looks at me and mimes pushing. Yeah, I see the problem. I wave him back and prepare for the necessary maneuver.

How does it come to this, anyway? I'm not what you'd call a good person. I have what I think is a noble vision for humanity as a whole, but at the same time I have nothing but the deepest contempt for almost every individual person in that whole. I think little of abusing others' trust and I pay out respect slowly when I do it at all. I don't owe the bastards in town a thing... except that, well, I do. I can't explain it. Is my long-dormant, long-suppressed empathy at work again? It will suck mightily if I find out I'm just doing all of this as a matter of neurolinguistic shell shock, so to speak, the result of too much telepathy without proper controls. But the feeling is still there, and still demands that I act on it.

I swerve and steer directly into the jeep.

The shock of impact is terrible. The jeep takes it worse, and rolls side over side off the road down into a narrow rocky ravine that presumably holds rainy-season overflow. It explodes when it hits bottom—that's probably a result of the batteries and stuff associated with the AI rather than the jeep itself, since it's usually much harder to make a car explode than you'd guess from TV. I just barely have time to see the signals passing along between units in Roswell flicker out and know that the town's been saved before I plunge down into the ravine myself.

Black smoke rises from the wreckage: a solid black mass, completely unreflective and shaped roughly like a human being. The van tumbles through it like so much darkness, and slams into the ground near the jeep with a terrible shudder, shattering glass, and a full bounce, but no explo-

sion. There's something lodged in my useless leg and it hurts to breathe. I have several broken teeth, too.

The humanoid darkness comes flowing in through the air vents and congeals into a human form on my twisted passenger seat, without so much as asking. "Get out!" I shout at it, ignoring the jabbing pain from what must be a broken rib.

It makes a peculiar coughing sound. "I come for you, Ming Xian."

"Oh, fuck off!" I shout. "I'm not her! She's just some damn hallucination I had on Mars! You're the biggest disgrace to cosmic horror I've ever encountered!"

"You have the soul of her," that strange voice says. "You have the soul of her and therefore you are her."

"I'm not her jack or shit! I'm me, there are no souls, and you're some freak of nature that's taking up space I could be using to come in! So get the fuck out."

"This is the day of your doom, Ming Xian. You will not endure to see the end of all things, and you have no place in ascension."

I spot a camera thrown forward from the debris in the back of the van and grab it. I fire off a dozen strobe flashes in quick succession, really hoping the light will do more than just make it flinch and scream. Unfortunately, that's all I get, and who really needs to hear shadows screaming more than once? But it hangs in there, despite its outer layer boiling off. Finally it grows a new voice again. "That hurts. You must not do that again."

"I'll do whatever I damn well please. Now get out. Go haunt Mars and look for the Tomb of the Unknown Conspiracy-Monger, for all I care. This is my van. I'm not your target, and you aren't paying for gas, so shove off." I can hear Nicolas calling my name from up above, but he's obviously decided to get much better intel before trying to help. Can't blame him there, since I would too. Did I mention that I'm not really a nice person?

The shadow thing twists around for a while, and then it does take off. That part is good. The bad part is that every single piece of shadow in the van goes with it, including shadows lying on solid objects. The van and I are both ripped apart in a stupidly arcane version of that explosion I thought I'd avoided. By some fluke, my head is pointed nearly straight up as it sails free. I can see Polaris shining away. And getting redder. And spreading. The last thing I see is the Red Star taking over the pole star to gaze at me one last time. Damn every last subatomic particle and Planck cell in this lousy shithole of a universe. I hate dying while looking at some stupid metaphor given melodramatic existence.

Figures, really.

## ROBERT

The first refrigerator falls from the sky now as we enter the mental hospital's grounds. I suppose I'm not terribly surprised. Whatever it is that's been following us in the shadows is getting bolder, and part of that is the weakening distinction between spirit and flesh that we must

deal with. The swarms of body-seeking avatars aren't visible to my mute charges, but I can tell all these pseudo-acolytes know something's haunting them. They shoot worried glances side to side. Too many of them take to drink and drugs taken from abandoned convenience stores along our way, and honestly, I can't blame them too much. It must be maddening to feel that something wants to replace your very soul with itself. Even the staunchest materialist who never thought of his thoughts as anything but chemistry can recognize such an intruder when it comes. All of this adds up to serious unrest, and my own unease acts as a beacon of its own. So now, crashing into the material world, comes a bundle of poorly resolved spirit that chooses to be a refrigerator. It lands on the roof of the hospital's garage, teeters, and falls down to the driveway. I can't see what food spills out of it, but there's something there. I assume it'll reek when we get closer to it.

"Maria," I say quietly, "I don't think I have much time left. This is stuff being drawn to me. It looks to me like there's still some underlying order, and I have some hope that if I die it'll clear up. But then you'll have to take charge."

"Falling refrigerators have something to do with you?" She laughs. "That may be the most egotistical thing you've said so..." She realizes I'm not joking. "Okay. Are you expecting to get crushed?"

"I don't think so," I say while pointing at the bushes where I last noticed the shadow stalker. "Eaten, more likely. If anything does come for me, step back a little ways so that it doesn't decide you're too closely linked to me, okay?"

She nods. "This sucks, though."

"It really does," I agree. "This isn't the life I'd have chosen for you, or for any of the others. I hope that you can get them talking—I think it would do them some good to share their experiences. But you'll all need a lot of courage and grace, and I wish there were something I could do to make it easier for you." I hear a rustling, and motion her back. "Too soon. Sorry."

Out of the bushes charges a thing of pure, amazing darkness. I've seen the night without stars. I've been blindfolded in a cave. This is darker than any of that, a curse from which light flees. Its outlines are vaguely human-like, with massive limbs sprouting appendages I get no clear sense of. Its silhouette is confusing, in flux, and judging its speed and size is a mug's game. It'll be here when it's here.

It speaks with a voice formed out of channeled winds, deep and somewhat hoarse. "I have come for you, Ming Xian."

What the *hell*? It takes me a moment to remember that Ming was the Chinese woman I met at Doissetep, the oldest member of our little combo. I haven't thought a whole lot about her lately, despite being aware that our bond continued to exist in quiescent form and could become active again. I honestly didn't expect it to matter quite this way, though. As soon as the thought occurs to me, I can peer at the very faint silver traces of astral tie and see that the shadow stalker isn't following that. This is not a thing emerging from our connection, and for that, at least, I'm grateful. I'd like to know what the hell it is, of course.

The other day, I explained to Maria that the language of prevailing religious and cultural assumptions could often serve the shaman's more esoteric purposes. Now I get to give her a lesson in that principle in practice. "Begone! You transgress against the order of the world, and in this time of impending judgment, you must give heed to your sins!" I learned this sort of faux-Catholic exorcism years ago, and it continues to work. It must be a combination of tone and echoes of actual binding rituals. The thing teeters back....

And then there is the loudest sound I've ever heard. Nothing even begins to compare to it. Think of every wall you've ever seen falling over at once. It's like that, only more so. There's no physical damage. What fell is the wall between the material world and all the spiritual realms. The first thing through from the other side is the Rubbish. It piles into the back of the cringing shadow thing and then ignites in a pure golden flame. The shadow thing dissolves into a dry dust in seconds—precious little can resist a magical force that resembles napalm or a fuel-air explosion, and the Rubbish shaped all its most useful parts very carefully.

Once the shadow-creature is gone, I look at the badly charred Rubbish. I go over and give it a hug. "Thank you," I say.

The Rubbish is mortally wounded, I realize. It's dissolving item by item into the air. But it smiles and laughs. "Flesh is fun! I like to walk from there to here just like you, be flesh just like you! Besides, now there is no more now." With that, it's gone and so is everything else. I hope that Maria and the others have a little more while of material exist-

ence yet ahead of them, that this is the end for me, but not quite yet for all of the world I've now left behind.

*Now there is no more now.* Not a bad summation. There was; there is not. Only judgment remains, perhaps.

## MING XIAN

There are successes to go with the tragedies. I do not witness any souls ascending to the bosom of the Celestial Emperor, but I do see some free to gather in their own memory palaces and the other features of the realms where spirits wait for final judgment. Furthermore, here on earth, the northwest district of Urumqi begins to flourish and bloom, to nearly everyone's surprise.

My fellow Chinese tend to stereotype the Uygurs for being at once very successful militarily, and also very lazy and indolent. It's not true. All they've ever needed is direction, and I can provide that by reminding them of their own tradition of beautiful order together with some exhortations about how living well now blesses all who help make a good gathering possible, and about self-sufficiency as a key step toward independence. They may wonder why this Chinese servant of the government seems to speak against her own interests that way, but they pay attention.

And sure enough, it works.

The dry autumn winds come on unusually rapidly this year. The seasons are hastening into expression, I think, each hoping for at least one last pass at the world and its marvels. Every year,

those winds mean drought and the risk of fire, inside the city as well as out because of insufficient irrigation and the absence of any effective windbreaks. This year our district gardens are ready for them. Two blacksmiths worked out an ingenious plan that turns half a dozen relocated pine trees into something close to a natural windmill, diffusing and cooling the breeze and letting the heat radiate away later. The streets are clean, so there's little trash to blow. The cisterns are freshly cleaned and painted, and everyone knows that we have an entirely sufficient water reserve in place. We flourish.

Imitators spring up elsewhere in the city and the surrounding countryside, and I'm glad to advise all of them as best I can. I gain a reputation as the Chinese With the Answers, something that doesn't always please my fellow Han. Some say I've gone native, or just crazy, but the quality of my district's work provides a powerful counterargument: a weak-willed, slothful person simply could not accomplish all this. Results often speak for themselves, and so they do here.

I seldom speak to my neighbors and fellow workers of the growing madness beyond. It's difficult to make much sense of the stories, to be honest. Zombies? A demon proclaiming himself king of the world? Fields of fungi that hunger for human blood? It doesn't add up to anything. I remind myself that each strange thing is just one more sign of the world's winding down, faster and faster.

When the moon starts going through a complete cycle every day, even the most illiterate farmers take notice, but they also take notice of my

answer: All Under Heaven is in each under Heaven. We may properly pray for others in their time of trouble, but our responsibility is here. Till your own field, for it too is filled with wonders and terrors. It is of course not easy for any of us to ignore such things. We have friends and relatives out there, and varying measures of that curiosity which is one of the defining qualities of humanity. We yearn to help, and I reinforce the message that their decision to stay and work here is contributing, quite directly, by strengthening allegiance to the Way in all its virtue. Our work here is directly kin to all its counterparts everywhere.

Good works only take us so far, of course. It seems that the very end of the world is arranged so as to foster meditation, for our tools and the coherence of the world are lost long before we cease to live. First complex machines break down, dissolving into a general fog that grows thicker each day. The ground itself becomes soft, and some of us are lost sinking into it. At the same time, like things begin to merge. I first notice this with a litter of kittens who liked to prowl in our gardens, hunting the vermin. I actually see them all dissolve into the fog and reemerge as a single kitten. Then I see it happen with a row of tract houses. One day I spend all day treating terrified prostitutes who found their customers each merging into a single man.

When I wake up and find that my feet have merged, I decide that the time has come to emulate the Taoist sage who sailed on his back through the inland seas and rivers, admiring Heaven from below. Without a sound, the roof of my little house dissolves to let me do just that; the landscape is becoming more and more responsive to my wishes.

In the distance I can hear chimes. My last thought, before dissolution takes me as well, is that I did indeed succeed in building a little land of righteousness, in the face of all opposition. May Heaven be pleased with my offering.

This is the end.



## PART FOUR: PROJECTION (TRANSITUATION OF BASE METALS INTO GOLD)

*I am all of these things—and yet I am none.  
Betrayal and blasphemy fill each of these paths.  
God sent me a sign in the fragments of light.  
My goal is solitary—as my path must be.  
I must make the many voices—One.*

—The Fragile Path: Testaments of the First  
Cabal, “The Song of Bernadette”



## WILLIAM

Every scientist and engineer knows about that moment of epiphany, when multiple subconscious thought processes come together in a single crystal realization to the effect of, "I've been very wrong, and here's the right way out from here." Death proves such a moment for me.

In the first place, it's something of a surprise for death to prove anything at all. My atheistic materialism has never been so complete as to deny the possibility of some survival of consciousness after physical death, but I've dealt with enough psionic manifestations to know that there's a big difference between semi-autonomous functions in the noetic medium and anything like real personality. If you ram your face hard enough into the wall, it'll leave an impression that future generations can see, but it's not like being there yourself to greet them. This, however—whatever it is I'm experiencing now—this is precisely like being there myself.

At least there's no long dark tunnel to happy relatives and white light. That really would be too much. Rather, my viewpoint remains right where it's always been, in my head. I don't have any physical sensations apart from sight, or at least I'm not aware of any if I do. My viewpoint just lies there, watching the Red Star. For the first few seconds I also get to see body parts and car parts flying around, the legacy of that terminal car crash, and then it's just calm. A few minutes later, Nicolas leans into view, looking down at me... and dammit, this so the wrong moment for sentimentality! He closes

my eyes! Now all I can see is the darkness inside my eyelids.

I have time to think about my last encounter. The creature addressed me as Ming Xian, who was, I think, the Chinese woman I met on Mars (always assuming that experience actually happened, but hey). Okay, I can safely assume that it was tracking some residue we were both exposed to on Mars; I'd be very unsurprised to learn that it went after the other guy (Robert was it?) as well. As for just what it was... I could be here quite a while tallying known categories of entities it might belong to, and that's assuming it is in fact something the Union's tallied and studied properly. We on the front lines know just how iffy such an assumption is.

Meanwhile, I've still got this problem of continuing self-awareness. The things I saw before Nicolas closed my eyes did not suggest the sort of time compression that Ambrose Bierce popularized in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" way back when. This is not my brain constructing one final story to tell itself in the last few seconds of awareness. This is minutes and hours of thought going on in a brain that I know to be severed from its torso. This is upsetting, or it would be if I were capable of feeling any emotions. I gradually realize that I am, actually, despite the loss of attachment to my endocrine system along with the rest of my body. I sincerely hope this starts making some sense soon, and I brace myself for an unpleasant cosmological shock.

## ROBERT

When I was a boy, I loved Dr. Seuss books. One of them had a story of creatures for whom "here is too near and there is too far," and who therefore spend all their time rushing back and forth. The shaman's life is very much like that: we're too close to the spirit world to be comfortable here, but so thoroughly part of the material world that we cannot simply settle down there. It's the same with our lives within the world, too, always driven to seek a community and always driven away from it because of the unique experiences granted to (and forced upon) us. As my body crumbles, I have a sense of... not returning home, because I have no lost home in that sense, but of advancing toward home.

Just as I expect, my soul moves out into the spirit world one final time. The Gauntlet that once separated matter and spirit is gone now, or at least a tattered mess, and I see things differently. To the best of my knowledge, no shaman has ever seen the "avatar storm" as anything but a vast field of sharp knives, or teeth, or broken glass or some other symbol of cutting. Now I see within it a sea of faces—men and women of all ages and races, all filled with a tremendous and desperate sadness, such as I've seen only in those about to die for what they feel is an unnecessary, avoidable reason. They glow to my inner eye with aged power. In the material world, I could see them only as an ominous fog or half-glimpsed faces. Now... the threat they pose to the living isn't diminished. If anything, I see it more clearly,

as I can see the wills behind them. But I see their suffering and their knowledge of the impending end. I can sympathize, even if I decline to condone what they're doing.

As I leave matter behind me, the signs of the end are everywhere. On Earth, the Red Star is a discrete bright light. Here it's a pervasive glow. And there's a new movement everywhere around me, as like hurries to reunite with like. Soon all the spirits of foxes, for instance, will be part of the single spirit of Fox, and I presume that in turn she'll go on to fuse with the other totems into the essence of Animal, and so on up the great chain of being. It's fascinating to watch, if somewhat disconcerting. It's certainly easy to understand why the physical world is losing its coherence: things fall apart from the soul out, as Xoca used to tell me.

(Is Xoca still alive? Is he waiting for me to merge with him and others to become a sort of Shaman totem?)

There are good reasons that shamans are vague about what happens to most people when they die. None of it is very comforting. Either the soul is quickly reborn, passing along its essence while the last personality is lost, or the soul ends up stuck somewhere—a ghost, if it's in or near the Gauntlet, one more of the infinite drifting knots of spirit if it's farther away. Most cultures' funeral rituals are something like anesthetic for both the living and the deceased, calming them enough (or channeling grief into acceptable enough outlets) for the next stage to get underway without too many com-

plaints. Right now, though, it looks to me like both of the usual routes are broken pretty badly. I hear a growing clamor from souls looking for, well, anything at all to anchor to, and I worry about what it may all mean.

How long is this end time going to take? That's one of a great many questions I didn't get to ask back at Doissetep. I wonder how I might go about finding out now.

## MING XIAN

It was the arrogant assertion of the later Ming and Qing emperors that there could be nothing worth knowing beyond China's borders, because the world began in completion and any change must necessarily be loss. Since China was at the heart of things, less had been lost there than anywhere else, and so it was simply unthinkable that something could be both desirable and only found far away. I have perhaps lived too close to the opposite error, of feeling that whatever was of value must be lost, hidden, removed and far away. I've lived so much of my life in the search for these buried truths, and have dug through untold quantities of dross and waste as well as though rich veins of lore worth returning to the world. Now I emerge into this new realm and am seized with the sudden sense that there are no secrets.

The emperor's throne sat at the north end of the throne room, facing south, because north is the direction of heaven and south the direc-

tion of earth. From his vantage, closest of all mortals to heaven, the emperor could see the whole world. That wasn't just superstition, either: the emperor could indeed see a great deal when the rites were properly performed. I think about that now as my soul drifts free of the chaos that my body became, because I'm aware of a northward drift. The world spreads out beneath me, round only in geographical terms. Its *meaning* lies flat before me, its dense signs and busy movements waiting for me to understand them.

Not long after I form that thought, though, I'm reminded that danger doesn't end with death. As my spirit rises, so do a trio of dark shapes. Not like the hungry ghost that followed me for so long, but like the shadows of great predator birds cast by unseen hunters in the swirling clouds of yang that border the heavens. They circle aimlessly off in the distance, then rush toward me faster and faster. Here my spirit is naked—certainly I have no armor or weapons ready—and I have to think faster than the hunters can fly.

And just like that, I have the thought I need, rising out of my own contemplation. I look at the world turning beneath me and the pole star far above (now mostly eclipsed by the Red Star, but still managing some pale shine of its own), tracing out the compass I need to orient myself. Then I turn away from the pole star, heading south. Here, moving south also means moving symbolically from a position of prominence to one of subordination, a more generic stance. The hunters have a harder time finding me here: from

their point of view, I shrink and fade, blending into the swirl around me. They make slashing dives through the mists, but none of them manage to come anywhere close to me. (I do regret the hurt being done to the forces among which I hide. I must find some way to make amends to them when this episode is over.) With frustrated shrieks, the predators turn away and go back to orbiting the area from which I emerged, perhaps expecting me to risk the return there.

But my retreat, it turns out, has its own logic. Once my fall has begun, I cannot quite manage to stop it. The light fades as I contract.

## ROBERT

As I study the movements all around me, night falls. I drift behind the Earth, watching the sun fade, casting complex coronas in its final moments... and I wonder, at least a little, if these really are its final moments, if I'm ever to see the sun rise again. As night deepens, the black sky stirs, that immense universe-filling body within which all stars and lesser lights find their place. Human souls flare like candles on the planet below me, and it's as beautiful a sight as ever. From here the turmoil of the approaching end is hard to see. It's only when I focus on any particular spot that I can make out the escalating chaos and transformation.

I continue to wonder just what those old dead magi meant by Judgment, and look for clues in what's going on all through the universe now.

The Hermetic magus (Porthos, was it?) would naturally think in terms of symbolism like that of the Tarot. I find that sort of thing annoying because it's unnecessarily constricting, but I understand it and I'm not fundamentally threatened by it. Insofar as there's real spirit behind it, there's something for me to talk to and work with.

The Chorister, now, she's another matter. Her kind thinks in terms of an absolute sentence, passing from the ground of being (God, or however they care to define it) to every individual thing. There's no room for discussion when God speaks, and their training makes them ready to obey God and command everything else. I fear the possibility of that sort of absolutism tainting the work now unfolding, because above all judgment must begin with understanding. The Choristers sometimes listen very well indeed, but too often that happens only if they think you're somehow carrying the word of God. They're too ready for this, really—too eager to shed the world of individual things and merge with their image of the totality.

And the Ecstatic? Anyone's guess. I've often thought that the Cult of Ecstasy isn't so much a tradition or body of lore as it is a bunch of magi who like hanging out together. And I have even less sense of what consummation might mean to someone whose experience of the world is so thoroughly unlike mine. If anything, my recent encounters with reversed spirits leaves me even less confident that I can understand anyone who spends their life traveling back forth in time like Ecstatic masters.

What of me? How do I think of judgment, with or without the capital J? As night thickens—literally, that is, the power of darkness being tangible here in Earth's shadow—I realize that I'm honestly not very sure. I have always thought of it on the small scale, I guess, as the force of accumulated moral consequence made manifest in the lives of individuals and communities. I don't think of it as an ending, but as part of the cycle of life, as constantly present as breathing and dreaming. The thought of the same force acting on everything at once scares me, above all else, and confuses me. Judgment is, in my experience, part of preparing for the next generation. If there isn't any, what can it mean?

I do not at first realize just how thick the darkness is growing, as I continue my introspection.

## WILLIAM

As I drift in this terminal isolation, I try to make some sense of it all. I categorically reject the implications in the theories of deranged reality manipulators who fancy themselves magicians, and yet it seems obvious that the holes in my worldview were larger than I ever really suspected. I recall the debates back in the eighties and nineties about the viability of consciousness as a standing wave function in "empty space" (which is to say, space filled with energy and/or information rather than matter). My team argued against the concept as something either

obtainable in nature or worth pursuing given prevailing technological and budgetary limitations. The simplest hypothesis available to me now is that we were wrong, and that the shock of my physical death in such peculiar circumstances created this post-mortem consciousness.

I wonder: if it's happening to me (and if it isn't that, it's something else), is it happening to others? The Union used to debunk the "research" of credulous seekers of psychic truth partly because the alleged messages from the dead were so pathetically empty. Now, I'm both strong-willed and trained in a wide variety of techniques for mental focus, and I can tell that if this is extended indefinitely, I will break. The only questions will be when and under what circumstances. Someone without my advantages from heredity and training would break sooner, and might be relatively likely to break in a stereotypical fashion and sound just like, say... a babbling ghost.

There is another possibility, and under the circumstances I'd be a fool to ignore it. The technology to impose arbitrary sensory data on a subject is nothing new to me: I've used it on enemies of the Union myself, and helped develop refinements. This could all be someone's effort to convince me that I'm dead or in the midst of some psychological breakdown. I must keep on my guard for any signs of an agenda underlying this apparent experience.

I'm suddenly aware of something approaching. There's... well, there's no sound that I can

hear. It's like feeling the pressure wave of something moving fast through the atmosphere. Uncomfortable as I am thinking of the problem in these terms, there is an aspect of pure gnosis to it: I simply *know* that something's approaching. Two things, in fact. They open up before me, and...

## THE ALCHEMICAL MARRIAGE

We fall together in the thickening darkness, aware now only of each other. Whatever else there may still be in the universe is far away from us, and we have no landmarks except for each other. Our thoughts and feelings shine in the darkness—we cannot help but draw together, seeking something to sustain us against the void, which would take us all if it could.

In the darkness, we intersect, even as we continue to fall. It's not a collision, nor is it the interpenetration of intangible fields. It's more like the blending of liquids than anything else any of us can think of, and each of us knows enough to think of alchemy as we feel our essences slide into and around the others. We do not lose our individual natures, and yet there is also something present here that is born out of all three of us without being precisely any one of us.

To this union I bring my courage, my pride, and my reason. I have always sought to live my life in accordance with the best available evidence most rigorously analyzed, and even now,

as I feel whole categories of unsuspected existence opening up to me, I remain a man of method. I am the anchor that keeps the others from drifting into folly and credulity, the voice always ready to say "Oh yeah?" and "Sez you!" in response to new claims. Although I've never thought of myself as conservative, I see now that there is an important and honorable conservative face to this way of living. I impose burdens on new things, requiring them to demonstrate their worth before admitting them to the fold, and this is a good thing to do.

To this union I bring my empathy, my curiosity, and my perception. I have always sought not only to understand what's going on around me, but also to make sense of it, to bridge the gaps that isolate us one from another. Brought into spiritual wakefulness in the midst of terror, I have always felt a special burden to undercut the power of fear and isolation wherever I am. I am the outstretched hand, willing to touch and hold the unfamiliar thing and assess its properties, and willing to treat the wounds of others with skill and compassion. I don't love novelty for its own sake; what I love is the understanding that binds together new and old into something greater.

To this union I bring my acceptance of transformation, my mastery of ritual, and my poise. I have been willing to examine myself for signs that I ought to become other than I was and to pursue such changes at whatever cost. But I have also been willing to examine myself, find my current condition good, and rest in it. I under-

stand how to act with deference to those who deserve it and with authority to those who need it. I am the tide which sometimes rises high on the beach, covering over what has been with the waves of possibility and which sometimes recedes, allowing all the things that live on and beneath the beach the time to lead their lives. I am the balance between stasis and chaos, the ability and desire to change tempered by a love of the world as it already is, including myself with all my various flows.

We can hide nothing from each other, and so we all acknowledge that we feel great fear. In the darkness, logic fails, community fails, ritual fails. We try to fly, to teleport, to awaken from a dream and be elsewhere. None of it works. The empty winds continue to rush past us, carrying sounds that might (or might not) be distant voices distorted beyond comprehension. As William, we know that the depths of space and more-than-space are home to creatures inimical to all life as we know it, recalling horrendous battles against such perils and secret graves for those who fell in the war for the world's borders. As Robert, we know that there are spirits of every vile passion as there are of every good passion and worthy impulse, recalling fellow shamans whose zeal for healing led to them being devoured inside and out by the lurkers in darkness. As Xian, we know that the last emperor of all under heaven is the demon emperor who embodies all wickedness and that he draws everything that is unworthy to his service.

But we also find within ourselves unsuspected strengths. William's anger and Robert's empathy add up to a potent foundation for strategic insight, understanding but not condoning. Robert's willingness to reach out and Xian's mastery of harmonious motion combine to allow for precise steering, and with a single thought we feel that we've ceased to fall. Now we rise back up through the blackness toward the rest of the world, faster even than the wind that whispers around us. Xian's experience with radical change and William's urgent desire to escape his limits make for a great flexibility of response, allowing us to reshape the ways in which we move through this unfamiliar space. Xian's dedication to harmony and Robert's dedication to healing make for a potent balm for our individual and collective fears, allowing us to see our strengths and chart reasons for hope even in the midst of all this.

As we rise, we become aware of the various ways in which we are a microcosm of the world in its final days. We are male and female, and we are young and mature and aging. We do not include either childhood or great age, but then perhaps the union of those elements is the task of others. We at least cover much of the span of active independent life, and it is the adult decision-makers who shape the world now, since it lacks either scope for future generations or reason to preserve the legacy of the past. We also cover the span of those with awakened wills: Technocrat, Traditionalist, independent. (At this point both William and Robert protest that

the idea of a single individual representing everyone in either the Union or the Council is ludicrous. Xian laughs for the first time since her death and responds that they didn't object to representing a whole sex that way. The men are both embarrassed and think a little about their respective conceptual blind spots.) We are, finally, the gamut of those outside the scope of normal health, with our various disabilities and rearrangements.

This awareness does not diminish our respective self-awareness and doesn't overlay it. It exists alongside, in a way the language of solitary beings isn't designed to accommodate. We could separate, and by way of experiment we do, and the bond uniting us does not weaken. There is an "us" as strong as the "I" that holds each of us together.

I talk with the others, comparing notes about what I'm forced to accept was in fact my death. It is profoundly unsettling to me to accept the validity as well as the mere existence of what the others cheerfully call supernatural, but the alternatives (like delusion, say) all seem increasingly inadequate.

There are times when the arguments make me uncomfortable, since I lack either the fanatic drive of the engineer or the sense of duty-laying tradition that's so important to the civil servant. My own convictions are more personal, and often all I can do is listen.

I find the men fascinating, but so often prone to assumptions that someone must challenge. It's

just tiring, sometimes, to constantly be the teacher, when there's so much I don't know, either.

We realize gradually that in terms of terrestrial time, our deaths were not simultaneous, as we'd first thought. William died first, well before the immense scrub fires that scoured that whole region. Robert died next, an early casualty of the fragmenting Gauntlet and the resulting tangibility of internal landmarks. Finally Xian died, perhaps one of the last people to maintain a separate identity. We are bound partly by fate, partly by the uniting power of... Here we pause. We have each thought of the Red Star as a nemesis, and yet it's what brought us together in the first place, preparing us for the role we are about to play. The whole terrible trauma each of us endured was a sort of trial by fire, stiffening us so that we could linger, join and observe now. The Red Eye of Judgment has made us into eyes and minds that can watch its handiwork. We decline to feel gratitude for what we've been through, but for the first time we feel a great hope as well as great curiosity about what is yet to come.

Judgment begins for us here, still in the blackness. Three pairs of eyes examine each of us in turn, not detached or dispassionate but capable of a larger vista even as we remain personally engaged with the lives we have lived. Shaman, scientist, magician; explorer, doubter, guardian; independent, employee, boss. The triads multiply in all directions, forming a prismatic

halo around the essences underneath. I can look at my weaknesses: how I embraced the Wu Keng's transformation of my sex out of the desire to be exotic as well as the desire to express my true inner nature, how I used the shaman's burden of isolation to neglect the efforts that mundane social bonds require, how my anger at my disability led me to emphasize my difference from and superiority to humanity at large. I see pride, jealousy, sloth, and countless other sins all laid out in ways that I cannot deny. There is no shame in this, because the three of us together are not strangers to any one of us now: this is self-examination, not judgment from outside.

Not yet, at least.

I also see strengths and virtues that I've been inclined to overlook, and above all I see how my deeds have affected those around me. I was not wrong to travel as a healer rather than commit myself to one place, because my cosmopolitan approach let me complete many local patterns even though I built none of those myself. My work in family planning did indeed help strengthen the dignity of the Uygurs I worked with, and had the world continued (I see in a complex, though fleeting vision), in time it would have been one thread in the tapestry of their independence. I was right to want to guard the walls of the world, and to charge into battle against the night terrors so that the masses could sleep; again, had the world lasted, it would have contributed to the rise of that truly liberated humanity my colleagues and I dreamed of.

As this assessment comes to completion, we soar out of the blackness, up into the endless Umbra. The spiritual landscape has changed substantially in however long it was we fell and rose. The world we lived on is gone now, every scrap of matter released back into the spirit from which it came. This isn't to say, though, that there's no planet Earth. It's still there, just no longer separated from the rest of the universe by the Gauntlet. Whatever's there now is there because it had some inner significance that endures to face judgment. Physical senses no longer matter in this stage of existence, but there's something comparable in our rapidly expanding sense of affinity. Some people, places, and things seem close at hand. We can't yet always (or even very often) tell why, but we know at a very deep level that these are all things that share some important part of their identity with us. We are briefly blinded by the flood of new insights as we leave the blackness behind, but then we adjust and find ourselves in a sky far richer and deeper than any that could exist within the confines of matter.

As a child, I always hated the awareness of having come in too late, after the start of a joke, the first act of a play, the first play of a game. I see now, from my multiplied viewpoint, that this was one more way my lives prepared me for the chronicling I'm doing now: my curiosity across all three lives gives me the resolve to keep looking even as details become hard to follow. I'm motivated in ways that others wouldn't be. We

also realize that I'm slipping back and forth between singular and plural in thinking of ourselves and how I interact with the surrounding cosmos. My lives haven't become blurred; each one remains vivid and distinct. But the more we see together, the more a new composite awareness claims the singular for itself. I am the sum of Xian, William and Robert, but we are also something in my own right. We do not yet have a name for what I am, but we see that I am something.

## DANTE

My journey is nearly done, I think. I'm spending most of my time now walking, or whatever the spirit equivalent of that is, step by step across this final landscape. The power of Correspondence that I served doesn't mean much anymore when there's nothing *but* correspondences. Here there's nothing arbitrary or unrelated, so saying that I identify myself with Correspondence is a lot like saying I identify myself with air. Well, yes. Who doesn't?

High overhead, I see a familiar shape. Yes, as I peer more closely at it, I can see that it's one of the triune entities I guarded in the material world's final days. It looks to be prospering. (They look to be prospering? I have no idea what the right usage is.) I give it a little wave and wish it well before resuming my own march.

## THE ALCHEMICAL MARRIAGE

I told the Doissetep magi that I never found the Traditions' model of the nine spheres, or ten spheres and one missing, or whatever it was, all that useful. That was true, too. My work in all three lives was at once more general and more particular than that model, and founded on very different assumptions about the basic divisions of reality. Well, the joke was on us, at least in part. The nine spheres did reflect important historical truths about the differentiation of power from primal unity to what Confucians called the ten thousand things or all under heaven. From one through two to three and then to differentiation within each branch, this is how it went, and I can see how I would have advanced my work in all our lives by paying it a little more heed. I see that all three of me have a particular affinity for the primal force of Mind, and that in part we see and analyze now because the cosmos wishes it: we are something like neurons in the cosmic mind.

Not that this is license to see or understand everything. There are entities who were as deeply identified with another one of the spheres as we are with Mind, and they are rapidly passing beyond my ken. I see that it is my role to understand what people did with the gift of Mind and what came of their decisions; others will tend the rest.

I always thought of the universe as a neutral background on which the complex stories of living souls could unfold. I knew, quite early after my awakening, that whole worlds can have souls,

but I didn't extend that insight far enough. The universal soul is not just the sum of the myriad individual and collective beings within it, but a thing of its own as well, defined by the spheres and with a history I have yet to fully grasp. For a moment my consciousness unfolds into its three distinct lobes again, to permit a trio of parallel realizations.

I see that the universal soul is wounded, far more deeply than I ever suspected, and I know that my work as the bringer of healing-at-cost isn't yet done. I am still a shaman with a shaman's duties.

I sought the order of impersonal forces that defines the interaction of the data sets that comprise the universe, and I find them arrayed around me. Just as theorists from de Chardin and Soleri on have speculated, information is more fundamental than energy and matter. Here are the fields of probability, making it possible to measure information in terms of what could be transmitted and is not. The surprise for me is how intimately consciousness is interwoven with all of this, but it's a surprise only because of my old materialistic biases. I can and do extend my vision to encompass these new data without giving up my drive: I see my desire to understand fulfilled in unexpected ways. I am still a scientist and there are still phenomena to understand through the lens of reason and logic.

I took the Chinese traditional divisions as fundamental and regarded the "Western" spheres as an approximation. I see that there is truth in

both, and yet also incompleteness. This is not the realm of pure yin and yang, which prove to be more intimately bound with matter than I had suspected. And yet it is a realm of forces in the sort of dynamic tension I was taught to understand and guide. I remain a student of the harmony of things, capable of interceding to forestall chaos and foster benevolence.

When I was three souls, there would have been an inevitable contradiction here. Those views could not all be true at once. Now that I am a single soul, reconverging even as I think that particular thought, I see that each of them can be entirely true as far as it goes and yet not encompass the whole. My earnest theory-minded fellow magicians who spoke of somehow transcending or escaping the paradigms within which they practiced their art were wrong after all. The fundamental nature of things affirms rather than refutes every approach that supports the awakened will. This state beyond matter seems featureless, a blank slate for the will to force itself upon, only because it takes effort to learn its ways. The ultimate truth is fulfillment rather than negation.

Or so it would seem, if it weren't for the looming fact of the end. What can termination fulfill? I have much still to learn, and perhaps the universe as a whole, sensing through me as it does through each of us, may learn as well.

Looming in front of me is a little knot of slumbering spirit. I peer at it and realized that it's one of the time-reversed spirits drawn to me

when I was Robert. They were fleeing the end time we now inhabit, but they couldn't succeed. The ones who went furthest back, like this one, merely fell dormant, to awaken... like this one now, unfurling its delicate wings and extending feelers to probe for the missing material world. The scientist in me wonders if these spirits' flight might itself have hastened the end of things, withdrawing vital essence from the world's last days, but upon analysis I think not. There weren't enough of them to affect the great physical and spiritual weight of the world. This one here awakens, looks at me, looks up at the vast bulk of pure Mind above us, and drifts silently up. Soon it will have moved from the realm of thoughts to whatever single thought it is that the sphere thinks as a whole.

As I continue to watch and above all to think, I see more of the enormous structure that is the universe's final configuration. When I was alive, I studied diagrams of the nine spheres, mandalas, and other charts of sacred geometry. They were all right, in their various ways. The red light of judgment shines in the center of creation, which is also every point along the periphery—all terms for distance and relation become increasingly irrelevant, and I use them mostly because they're what I have, and I cannot discharge the duty to Mind with a mere wordless silence. Around the red light orbit the nine spheres, gathering their component pieces into themselves and spiraling closer together as they go.

I see judgment at work on both individual and cosmic levels. This spirit that sought to flee is pierced by a beam of pure red light, within which its cowardice shows clearly. The spirit sees its dereliction of duty and the small but significant harm that came at the end because some physical component of the city lacked its animating force and crumbled when a living human mind needed it. The spirit sees this, and so do I, and we both judge that failure. But we also see, the spirit and I, the terror of the time and the uncertainty about what might come next, and we see that self-preservation is a worthy drive that becomes ignoble only when abused. We see the countless small good deeds that happened because the spirit was, for almost all its existence, where it should be, doing what it should do. These do not excuse its failure, and its failure does not negate their reality. Judgment requires understanding of both, so understand we do.

The spirit, having now formed an assessment of itself, vanishes into the sphere of Mind, and that judgment is added to all the rest. Mind sees itself, and I see it, both as the source of inspiration and the source of distraction that made duty so hard at times. We see all the ways that Mind enriched the world, and all the ways that beings with minds worsened the world, physically and spiritually. This judgment is not done, and won't be until the very last of us ascend, nor will the comparable judgment be over for any of the other spheres until they are likewise complete. I see

the story, and I am part of the story. Soon the red light will shine on me, too.

Off in the distance—that is, engaged partly with thoughts I don't currently share—I see the death-rocker, Anders, wrestling with one of the heads of a hydra-like serpent. I don't think it's the Midgard Serpent, exactly, and if it is he's a bit late, what with Ragnarok having come and gone. But he's doing his part on the borderland of Mind and Entropy, protecting whatever spirits the serpent might otherwise prey upon. I'm suddenly filled with a profound curiosity about what judgment means to the force of Entropy, but my duties don't allow me the opportunity to go investigate. I do see Anders' thoughts illuminated clearly insofar as they bear on my role, with the rest hidden behind something like shadow. If the cosmos wishes it, no doubt there's someone beyond him to complete the work of observation.

Anders was and is a very angry man. He didn't so much woo the world into spilling its secrets as beat it until it let go. "Punch it until the candy comes out," some of my engineering colleagues used to say of such approaches. The great squirrel taunted him, goading him toward enlightenment, and on him it worked. He learned a great deal that he passed along in his music for the masses. If assessing the spirit at a glance was hard, with a man like Anders it's impossible. The good and bad he did circle endlessly around each other, mirroring within his one soul the cosmic dance overhead. I can see the wis-

dom and folly he had in childhood, youth, maturity, the lessons he learned, the ignorance he clutched, all laid out at once. If I were to describe the sum of it all in words, it would sound flat and neutral, but that's just what it *isn't*. Rather than negating one side or another, judgment affirms it all.

For a long while, or at least it feels long, Anders doesn't even notice. He's got the battle to occupy his attention. But the serpent is also being judged within the sphere of Entropy, and since it's less complex than he is, there comes the moment when it ascends to join the sphere. Then Anders finally notices what's going on. He doesn't see me, I'm pretty sure, but he gives a big triumphant laugh. That act completes his judgment: Mind accepts him as the victorious warrior he always wished to be, and he rises to take his place, tilting the overall balance of Mind that little bit toward conflict and mastery.

Suddenly there's a torrent of magicians around me—both those who thought of themselves as magicians, and those who identified themselves as scientists, philosophers, or what have you. This is the moment when those with awakened wills take their place. I am briefly surrounded by every one of them who helped or hindered me on my journey: the Wu Keng, who now see their folly; my colleagues at Project Ragnarok, who appreciate how their good intentions led them into blindness even as they remained useful in so many ways; Xoca and his fellow mentors, missing their already-judged to-

tems and ready to play their part. (I note, in this moment of understanding, that Xoca was a fellow traveler of the Doissetep magi.) It is a busy moment, full of greeting and apology and congratulation and a great deal else. We all see each other, in this perfect moment.

Then it's gone, and I'm alone. There may be other willworkers out there, beneath the other spheres, but they cannot be part of my story anymore. Whoever and whatever comes next will be something other than myself, and I will remain in this triune isolation until my role as narrator is done.

What comes next is a vampire, one of those who took part in the attack on Project Ragnarok that slaughtered so many of my colleagues. It's not clear to me why she's particularly closely identified with Mind, but then the universe will always have mysteries for however long I remain finite. We see that the scientific rationale of hematovores and viruses simply wasn't enough, and we see the fears and prides that led us to seek to put it all in some rational context. We also glimpse through her the terrible final nights of her kind, as the power in their blood waned and they turned on each other. Now I see why they attacked us: they were drawn to our unwitting strength of will and hoped that our blood might have some special power to sustain them a bit longer. I see how the founder of the lineage we'd dubbed EU1 actually slaughtered all his progeny in search of that same relief, and countless other ploys. None of them

worked, and as the young vampire's mind falls open to judgment I see the last vampires passing quietly into slumber or noisily into the conflagrations of dawn.

At least part of this story is more the domain of Time than Mind and hence obscured to me, but I see that the vampires didn't experience the end of the world quite like the rest of us. Those final slumberers descended into little eddies of time in which they could have an infinite future while we all raced toward the end in finite moments. So from their point of view, they never did wake up, and won't until called out from that infinity to another. There'll be one terrible moment of wakefulness for them, after the infinite sleep, and then judgment for them as well.

The vampire's judgment is as complex as Anders', but quite different in detail. I can scarcely bear to look at it, and indeed at least one of my faces does turn away from it. The hideous damage created by her sinful dependence on living blood cascaded through the world, in ripple after ripple of victims. No wonder, I realize, it was so often hard to heal a community: almost everywhere I ever went, these things were at work, darkening the world around us. They didn't make humanity wicked or simply venal, but they reinforced all our baser impulses and returned little but the ignorant envy of that seeming eternity of nights. I'm angry... and I see that I'll be judged for that anger, just as she is being judged for her part in the circumstances that lead to my anger. Nothing now escapes the watchful cosmic eye.

In the end, she is also gone up into Mind, and its cumulative judgment continues.

After her come other creatures, some much more familiar to me than others. Here is an elderly werewolf, whom I recognize as one who once attacked me on a remote Canadian highway. She told me, as she had me pinned with the massive claws on each hand, that my kind had stolen a power the world never intended us to have, and that she would heal the world by slicing it out of my soul. The fact that my body would also be cut to ribbons seemed to strike her as irrelevant. The now-gone Rubbish rescued me then, and in the end she fled to seek some other target on which to vent her anger. I understand, as I see her soul laid bare, just how justified so much of her anger was even as she sees the hubris that motivated that particular attack on me. We touch hands and hearts for a moment, realizing that we were closer than either of us would have accepted when we were alive. I see how she fell in a final battle against the forces that would unmake the world whole, and the servant of all under heaven within me salutes her bravery. She couldn't stop the world from ending, but the battle that she and her kind fought had consequences that linger on, we both see: the dance of the sphere is different because the world passed out of existence whole rather than shattered.

Off in the distance, I see several hungry ghosts, some Chinese and some apparently European, all facing up to the errors that led them to too confidently expect the wheel of ages to turn

in a particular way. Here I again come under judgment as well, since it wasn't all that long ago that I spoke of the demon emperor to the rest of myself. All of us made the mistake Plato described in his parable of the cave: we saw the shadows of the truth on a torch-lit wall and thought the shadows real, whether we called them Yozi or Malfeans or something else altogether. I see that the hungry ghosts partook in part of the slow time that wrapped itself around the vampire, so that they had years or even centuries to fight their wars against each other in pursuit of a destiny that would never come, and the weight of their actions is again more than I can bear. I look away until I feel them rise into Mind.

I see stranger things, half-human creatures that lived in the very walls of the world, and in dreams, and in secret enclaves throughout material existence. I can scarcely understand what it is they're being judged for, lacking words for the concepts that now race past me. Some fought to help or hinder an eternal winter. Others pursued goals of cosmic balance, or the gratification of some personal passion, or goals that just don't make any sense at all. Each of them is laid bare for all of us to see. So many of them helped darken the world, whatever their intent; I'm filled with the vain wish to see what the world might have been like without so many cursed monsters gnawing at its vitals. A few actually did something to help, and I see that ripples of redemptive love and strength could spread as far as the taint. But so few, so few...

It's becoming harder to think thoughts that make any sense as thoughts. It's not that the unification of scattered forces is making thought go away; it's that what such things' thinking is based on are conditions and experiences radically unlike humanity's. What could an ant understand of concepts like driving, government or wilderness? I feel that more and more of what's going on around me is that far removed from what I am now, and wonder if perhaps I'm struggling too hard. And yet there are still matters to sense and know.

Quite suddenly it's my turn. The red light fills my multiplied soul, and I feel an immediate awareness of everything I've done throughout my lives. Everything in this account emerges into full consciousness at once, together with a great deal more. And as the judgment proceeds, I realize that the judge is also subject to scrutiny. I understand that at the beginning there was indeed the One of whom so many doctrines speak. Something happened to the One, a division at a level far, far beyond my capacity to understand, and once it started, it continued. At first it was harmonious. I get fleeting senses of an age where many entities existed and yet harmony prevailed, until the process of division broke their fellowship apart.

I see that the pessimists who said that every generation is weaker than the last were indeed right on the most fundamental level. Even mighty acts of creation served the dissolution of the One, because every glorious work's identity as this or that separated it

from both its own other possibilities—what it might have been—and from all the other things it was not. This was as true of the spheres as of everything else, since in the One they were fused, more like nodes of force within a pure plasma than like solid chunks floating in a liquid. So it was that when they had all weakened each other and themselves sufficiently, by every act of creation, the oldest part of the One could also manifest for the first time. Judgment, I see now, must exist before anything else because judgment in all its various meanings is what makes every other distinction possible. There can be no “else” at all without judgment.

As the first steps toward reunification took place, some piece of the One became aware of itself and its current condition. The agony it felt is a taint that lies across the last four centuries of human history. The revolutionary nihilism that says there can be no real construction without total destruction, that's the self-misunderstanding One at work among us, yearning to be free of the consequences of all its past mistakes. Ironically, then, the purveyors of death and destruction also did their part to restore cosmic unity. The breakdown accelerated, both socially and cosmically, as fast as it could. Finally came the crucial moment, and here we are now.

All the while I'm learning this, the judging power also learns about me. I understand that I am, at bottom, three small pieces of that portion of the one best identified with Mind, and that while I can keep the other parts of me as well, they will prove hindrances to the full uni-

fication with the rest of what I am above all. My economics studies come in handy here, providing the rest of me with an introduction to the notion of relative advantage. If I pursue Mind and let Force or Entropy go, I will simply be stepping aside from competition with those for whom Force or Entropy is fundamental. And then when each sphere is perfected, Judgment can meld them back together into the one.

Beyond matter, there is spirit. Beyond both, there is essence. Beyond essence, there is potential: everything else that might ever conceivably be, in some sense. The same sort of alchemy that fused me into a single entity is at work in the cosmos. The spheres, once merely concepts, are now things as solid as the earth and as big as the sky, shimmering like gold and diamond in the red light. The light used to be a fearsome thing. Now it reminds me of sunrise beyond clouds, which will soon give way to the crisp clean morning in which each thing shows its best side. Everything that I have known passes, but in the depths of potential, there are all the things I did not and could not know. Mind waits above me, and beyond Mind, the unity of all. Will there perhaps be a new creation? The One might choose the same course all over again. It might also do something else. It might not do anything, for any meaning of "do" or "anything" I can grasp. I cannot know until I take the next step, and across that threshold, language as I have known and loved it cannot go.

But I can, and it is time to do so.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Baugh is a freelance writer and game designer whose work has appeared across much of White Wolf's product line and in the catalogs of several other game publishers. His novels include the three volumes of the **Clan Lasombra Trilogy—Shards, Shadows, and Sacrifices**—and his short fiction has appeared in the **Clan Novel Anthology**.



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