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HAUNTING THE DEAD

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Cover and book design by Becky Jollensten. Copyedited by Jonathan Laden.

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ISBN 1-58846-837-2

First Edition: September 2003

Printed in Canada

White Wolf Publishing

1554 Litton Drive

Stone Mountain, GA 30083

www.white-wolf.com/fiction

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THE GRASS
IS
ALWAYS GREENER

STEFAN PETRUCHA

1. THE RITE THING

The pizza was dead to begin with. There was no doubt about that. Its oven warmth had long dissipated, leaving the once supple slice a dry corpse of jaundiced yellow speckled with blood red tomato flecks, surrounded by half-eaten bony bits of crust. Once a source of excitement, conversation and sustenance, it now lay cold and crumpled in a thin, white coffin. Non-corrugated, the box was unacceptable for recycling, and thus condemned to remain in its present form somewhere in the abundant landfill of the world... forever.

Assuming it ever got out of the room.

While other students fought bitterly to make their dorm rooms homey or at least bearable; here, the bare, school-provided, black-and-white, box-like desks, beds and bureaus had only computer equipment, dirty laundry and half-hung posters of groups she'd never heard of for company.

Having fixed her eyes for a time on this one bit of refuse among the many that bedecked Martin Kleck's dusty off-gray floor, Shutter couldn't help but wonder if her soul was likewise non-corrugated, and therefore likewise condemned. The thought, she admitted readily, was an embarrassingly sophomoric stab at poetry. Nevertheless, thinking lame thoughts was infinitely preferable to trying to speak to the four other students who lay about the Feng-Shui-challenged room.

Her own domicile was admittedly darker than this, but by choice. It was a rare single in the overcrowded wing she called home, given to her for psychiatric reasons. In it, draped black cloths covered the motley brown brick, but there were also splashes of color—red, blue and purple sparkling like little gems against the dark. It was a look, an intentionally morbid effect. Whatever else was wrong with her, at least her room was not the result of neglect or carelessness, unlike this... accident. There simply was no "here" here.

So far as she could tell, no one even knew one another, or liked Kleck any more than she did. Nevertheless, they'd all been invited. So why had they all—why had *she*—come? The promise of free drugs was the easy answer, but for black-haired, white-skinned, too-thin Shuttty Couter there was a bit more. For her it was an absent-minded, half-assed stab at survival.

Prior suicide attempts aside, she had only manifested five of the eight warning signs: low self-esteem, anger-management problems, peer avoidance, school avoidance, and substance abuse. These were her sins—but all were practically prerequisites at her beloved college, and there were never more than five. That is, until a few nights ago, when she'd sat in the lounge and watched, for way too long, the couch fire her dangling cigarette had caused. Fire setting brought the total count to an unwieldy six, and that set off all manner of alarms. So, for the sake of continued anonymity, for her parents, for some nameless someone she might one day become, and for some childhood friends whose names she didn't even recall, she'd decided to accept geeky Kleck's cryptic invitation to a midnight gathering, to try a new drug and watch something "really freaky" on TV.

To Shuttty's mind, this would be socializing, bringing her total back down to a perfectly acceptable five. Unfortunately, the real lure, the promised drug, would only reinforce Sign Number Five, substance abuse, and possibly bring on Sign Number Seven, persistent headaches—but what the hell? A new drug was a new drug, and there was always the possibility it really would take her someplace she'd never been before, a promise more often fulfilled by opiates than lovers.

Vaguely manifesting a dim sense of social obligation, she turned toward one guest, Tragic Alex, hoping he could read her mind and obviate the need for speech. Sensing her attention, he immediately turned away, his drooping hands held close to his chest, like those of a rodent. Dissatisfied, she half-closed her eyes

so her heavily mascara-laden lashes invaded her field of vision, forming thick blurry bars against the visible world.

When she slowly raised her head, her stringy hair drifted alongside her face, revealing her small nose and flat cheeks. Joining a conversation would, of course, have been easier, but there was no talk to be had, nor human sound—save for Kleck's bizarre humming as he stood by his desk, half in shadow, fiddling with a borrowed DVD-R drive. Kleck, whom she imagined a failure in so many respects (physically, academically, spiritually), was turning out to be a crappy host to boot.

Making the effort, Shutter called out, "How's that going, there, Marty?" She'd hoped her voice would sound buoyant, but was surprised by how flat it came out. The bare brick walls and bumpy stucco ceiling muffled her vocal highs and lows like audio-Prozac. Rumor had it there was asbestos in these old dorm ceilings, so not only was it helping to kill conversation, it was probably just plain old killing them all.

Kleck's humming stopped. He rose and turned to her. For a second, as he emerged from the shadows of his desk, his face seemed hideously disfigured, like some rotting lump of dough with an eye stuck in here, a mouth there, and flaps of skin on either side of the lump where his ears should have been. When he smiled, though, his face tumbled back to its normal, puffy, sexless grotesqueness. She was terrified by the thought of what he might look like once she dropped whatever he was planning to give them.

But then he spoke: "Because of impatience we were driven out of paradise, because of impatience we cannot return." It was a sweet lilting voice that made her briefly like him. She prayed he wouldn't ruin the effect, but he did, rubbing his hands together like a fiendish mad scientist, punctuating the debacle with a "Nyah-ha-ha!"

She stared at him in disgust, wishing her eyes could burn. Though no flame appeared, Kleck wilted, return-

ing to the shadows and his work. She realized she'd hurt him, and a miserable thought nudged its way to the center of all her other miserable thoughts: he wanted her. It was obvious. Geek-boy Martin Kleck harbored some deep psychopathic longing for her skinny suicidal self. She just knew it. That was why she was here. The others were an elaborate beard for his true intentions. At some preordained moment, after she was willingly drugged, they'd all exit and leave the two of them alone. Cue music, roll credits over her anguished screams. How truly gross.

Funny thing was, whenever Kleck did speak calmly with that sweet lilt of his, whenever she bothered to listen, and his spirit, or psyche, or whatever, bubbled up through his boyish features and brought them to life, he actually struck her as quite handsome, in an unmolded, painfully raw sort of way. Then he chuckled like Dr. Frankenstein again, making her shudder at the frivolity of her libido.

Imagining herself a latter-day, Goth-influenced Dorothy Parker, she turned back to the pizza box, stared at it lazily with her contact-lens-green eyes, and, no less sophomorically, thought: *I have tried the rest and the best. And coming here to this dismal room of shadow people was only desperation, a disguise as slight as that little piece of oily paper that sits between the pie and the box.*

"Kleck!" a far manlier voice bellowed, overcoming the dampening influence of the room's acoustics. "Where are the piggy pills?"

This time, when he answered, Kleck didn't stop working, lending weight to her stalker theory. "Pigment, Jobe. *Pigment*. They will be disseminated in due time, my Neanderthalic amigo. Don't want to peak before the broadcast, do we?"

But it was clear from the audible huff that followed, that Jobe *did*. Smelling a challenge to the night's drabness, Shutty turned toward the auburn-haired star athlete pretty boy to gauge his reaction to Kleck's dismissive mocking tone. Jobe was across the room

from her, carefully sprawled on Kleck's bed, as if posing for an unseen audience. From Shuttty's view even his nostrils seemed muscular. The jock was hardly a greater prize than Kleck, unless a powerful, well-muscled frame ruled by a truly insect mind appealed—which, of course, did at times. Unfortunately, or perhaps for the best, his frizzy blonde trophy girlfriend, the long-legged, long-armed, long-torsoed Russian exchange student Bilka, lay between his legs like a big white Airedale guarding a particularly delicious bone.

Jobe leaned forward aggressively, pressing his chest against Bilka's hair. He shot back with all the humility of a one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind: "Why don't we just take more when your stupid scary show starts? I mean, I don't know how to break this to you, but just sitting around here is pretty fucking boring."

Arrogantly, little Kleck waved him off. "No. I'm calling the shots tonight. I want you to experience the drug for the first time while you're seeing the broadcast. I suspect even someone of your limited intellect will be able to appreciate the difference. Why don't you amuse yourself by letting your girlfriend count the hairs on your brain?"

Imagining itself pressed into a decision between fight or flight, the aforementioned furry brain chose fight. Jobe's face twisted. Feeling him tense, Bilka lazily raised herself and whispered in his ear. Relaxing a bit, he was just about to lie back again when Kleck, who'd noticed, added, "Glad you decided to be so open-minded, Jobe. But turn it down, I can hear the wind from here."

With that the jock bounded off the bed, spilling poor Bilka in the process. He made for Kleck, planting his tree-trunk legs mere inches from Shuttty's folded knees. She could feel the testosterone-induced rage rise off him like radiator heat. He bent over the desk and thrust his face close, as if it were a clenched fist. Kleck simply stood there, FireWire cable in hand, mouth half-open, not in shock but with a dim "Gee, I

really should have figured this would happen when I said that" expression on his face.

"Why would I trust a phat-free freak like you?" Jobe said, poking Kleck hard in the shallow meat just below his shoulder bone.

Kleck turned sideways and absently rubbed the spot with his hand. "Don't bruise yourself on the teen vocabulary, pal. The simple answer is because the drugs are mine," he said coldly. "And you don't know where they are."

"Oh yeah?" Jobe retorted. He forced his hands into Kleck's pockets, one after the other, repeating, "If I find them do I keep them?" over and over.

Pushing away from Jobe's legs, then standing for a better view of the homoerotic pocket-thrusting, Shuttty noticed something odd about Kleck, or rather, something else odd to add to the list—he wasn't afraid. Sure, he winced, and looked down when Jobe huffed and puffed, and he made the expected feeble efforts at pushing the larger man's hands away, but all that seemed more by rote than fear. Kleck wasn't fearful, he was experiencing something else entirely. She could see it in his eyes, whenever he glanced up, but Shuttty wasn't sure what it was. Was he getting off on the rough attention? No, she decided for no real reason other than it didn't smell quite right—but she had no other guesses.

"Jobe!" Bilka suddenly commanded, her enunciation of the "o" revealing a thick accent.

Shuttty had almost forgotten the girl. Now, as Bilka stretched and pulled her hair back, her eyes shining disapproval, she seemed to take up the entire room. The effect was immediate. Hands lowered, Jobe backed away from the desk. Kleck, though still watching Jobe, returned to trying to slide the DVD-R drive into an open bay of his tower case. Bilka rose and met Jobe in the middle of the room. She grabbed his wrists with both her hands and whispered. He grunted.

Fight over, she still standing, Shutter turned to look through the dust and grime of the never-washed, sixth-story windows that lined one wall of the room. They afforded her a dim view of the yellow and gray of the falsely lit streets below. As she exhaled, partly to calm herself, partly out of renewed ennui, a silver SUV, looking from this height more like a gaudy, cheap wireless phone on wheels than a gas-guzzling status symbol, whizzed along the damp black pavement and turned right at the corner, just as the signal changed from yellow to red.

Soothing as it should have been to realize there was still something of a world out there, she felt a strange unease. She lingered a moment, trying to place it. The thought that Kleck *wasn't* interested in her had piqued her interest in him again. Was that a sign of suicidal depression, too, she wondered? Or was all of this just a distraction from some deeper unease?

As she started to turn back toward the others, she noticed a small handprint in the lower corner of the filthy glass. Had it been there all along? She didn't think so. She rubbed her right hand with her left, trying to remember putting it against the window, but couldn't. That hardly meant she hadn't, though. Idly, she traced the outline with her index finger, then pressed her palm against it. Yep—same size, same shape. It was hers. The only horror show here was her memory.

When she turned again, she found herself staring at Bilka's neck, and had to tilt back to take in the taller girl's awkwardly smiling face.

This must be the female bonding portion of the evening, Shutter thought, but the two of them just stood there quietly for the longest time. Bilka's awkwardness was an unexpected shift from the lioness who'd recently bellowed the room into silence.

Eventually, Shutter said, "Hello?" and Bilka leaned forward. Surprised, Shutter stepped back, until she realized Bilka didn't want the others to hear what she

had to say. Though uncomfortable, she allowed Bilka to get close enough to speak privately.

"Are you... interested in Kleck?" Bilka whispered. "I am, too, but I don't want to interfere if..."

Shutty's face scrunched up tightly. She imagined she looked like a rubber doll about to throw up. "Wait a minute. Forget *me* for a second," she whispered back. "Clearly, *you* are hooked up with Jobe the Builder."

Bilka seemed confused, but by the time Shutty realized she wasn't going to get a pop-culture reference she'd never heard, Bilka caught the gist. The long pale fingers of her Slavic hands flashed in front of her face as she tried to conjure the appropriate American words. "He is... a trophy prize?"

"Uh, that's usually trophy bride," Shutty offered.

"Thank you, but women today are liberated, *da*? So, we may have trophies too, yes? Other women wanted him, he wanted me. I took him," she said. She shrugged in an offhanded way that suggested a refreshing lack of embarrassment, then flashed a smile across the room to where Jobe sat. He raised his drink to her and let loose a wet belch.

The two girls giggled. Shutty realized this really was the female bonding portion of the evening.

"Kleck is very intense, passionate," Bilka went on. "That interests me, but I like you and don't want to stop us from being friends."

The rush of information swamped Shutty's psyche: Kleck intense? Passionate? *Desirable*? Maybe she *should* go after him. And Bilka wanted to be friends? Wait a minute: what if it was a trick? What if Bilka was part of the whole let's-leave-these-two-drugged-and-alone plan? Sure, Bilka seemed sincere, but most people looked earnest when speaking in a foreign tongue.

Shutty decided to feign surprise and offense, hoping to learn more.

"Look, Bilbo," Shutty began.

"Bilka."

"Whatever. In this country we don't talk about people as if they were goods to be traded, or... or ways to stick it to the other girls," Shutter said.

"You treat them that way, but you don't want to talk about them that way? It's all right, you know. We may be the stuff of stars, or whatever, with immortal souls, but we are also *things*, bodies, and things are ways to power," Bilka answered. She'd ended the sentence, but after hesitating a moment, added, "Don't you think so, Shutter?"

Braced, Shutter met Bilka's eyes and gave her a bemused half-smile. As she did, she noticed for the first time that the Russian's eyes were blue, but smoky, as if they'd retained a bit of the chill from her native land.

"Hmm. Maybe we *can* be friends," she said.

Bilka smiled back, "So you are interested in Kleck?"

"Can I get back to you on that?"

Bilka nodded and pulled away. Tickled to actually have something to decide about, Shutter overcame her natural fear of college mating rituals and boldly walked up to Kleck, still working at the drive.

Without allowing a dreaded beat to creep into the space, she asked, "So, why are you doing this?" Having dived, Shutter worried she was about to scrape the bottom on the shallow end of the pool, but just as Kleck seemed about to answer, Tragic Alex (so named because, well, she had no idea *where* the moniker had come from) decided to take that particular moment to actually mumble something—a unique event that demanded immediate attention.

Everyone turned to the cross-legged figure on the floor—thin and hairy, decked in denim, with goatee and long, dark brown hair, looking every bit a throw-back to the beatnik age. His thin lips parted. They all strained to listen, but then he fell silent and turned to face the wall.

"What's that, Lassie? Timmy's trapped in a cave and we have to save him?" Jobe said, using one of his few jokes.

Bilka, again lying on the small bed with him, reading his tone but not the reference, slapped his inner thigh and giggled. "Oh, stop! You are bad!"

"Yes, I am!" Jobe said, then he leaned in and pulled at her upper lip with his tongue.

"So, this drug," Shutter half-whispered, using it as an excuse to stand just a little closer to Kleck and bring up the subject of sex, "It's not going to make them mate in front of us or anything, is it?"

"Shit, I hope not," Kleck answered. Finished with the drive, he slapped his hands together and stepped out from behind his desk, briefly catching his loose pants on the edge. "Then again, I've never given it to shaved gorillas before."

Shutter laughed and found herself looking into Kleck's brown eyes a little too deeply. The gaze wasn't intended as flirtatious, really. She was looking for something in his eyes, for him, but she couldn't find him. Still, she knew he would take her gaze sexually and wanted to slow things up.

Feeling uncomfortable, she broke eye contact and bent over to pull up her socks. She'd been experimenting with a quasi-virgin-Goth look of late—a thrift-shop black tuxedo jacket, with black blouse, black pants and black shoes, but also with loose white socks, frilly with a touch of color at the top. Unfortunately, the socks were too loose—and with every step she took they bunched lower and lower into her shoes, until finally her bare heels rubbed the cold, repulsively moist shoe bottom. Whenever she walked or stood even a little, she had to either bend over and adjust them, thus drawing unwanted attention, or bear with the cold feeling on her feet.

She bent over and felt Kleck's eyes on her. Half-smiling, she twisted her head to look up at him and tried to shift the unspoken subject.

"Is this show like *The Ring*, TV-man?" she asked, straightening.

"More like being in *The Ring*," Kleck said. "And I'm going to record it live, burn it to DVD, then try to analyze the MPEG stream."

"For what?" Shutty asked.

"Ghosts," Kleck said plainly.

"Phhhhrpp!" the prone Jobe interjected. "The only dead thing around here is going to be you, phat-free, if you don't get those doobies out soon!"

"Pigment, Jobe. Doobies refer to marijuana. If I get you a dictionary, maybe Bilka can read it to you," Kleck responded. Before Jobe could get angry again, Kleck nodded toward a cheap digital clock on his desk and said, "But, the time, the walrus said, has come."

As Jobe, childlike with expectation, laughed and stood up, Kleck pulled a small baggie from his back pocket. He shook it, taunting Jobe that he hadn't found the right pocket in his search, but the jock didn't care. The pills were small and ebon—not the bright candy-like colors Shutty was used to seeing from recreational medicines.

"Black heroin," Tragic Alex muttered.

He was standing, though no one saw him move. Now, of course, all eyes were on him—since these were the first clear words he'd spoken.

"Yes," Kleck nodded, as if he'd seen a pig sprout wings and fly. "AKA, for the third time, pigment."

Without further ado, Kleck doled out the pills.

Jobe rolled the tiny thing between his thumb and forefinger, tossed it into the back of his mouth and washed it down with a quick slug of soda.

"Are they safe?" Bilka asked.

Kleck shook his head. "No. They're a drug. But who cares? Life is overrated." He popped the ebon pigment pill into his mouth. "Self-destruction is an art."

"That's grim," Shutty said, but her eyes twinkled their agreement. She stuck her tongue out, and plopped the pill on its thick, pink wormy edge. Drawing it into her mouth, she gulped the puppy down.

"So, now we wait about ten minutes, then we turn on the tube. Meantime, shall we talk, or just pretend we're on a long elevator ride with people we neither know nor particularly care for?" Kleck said.

"What should we talk about?" Bilka asked.

"I don't know. Anything. We're intelligent adults. Four of us, anyway. Want to swap tales of how we lost our virginity?" Kleck suggested.

Tragic Alex looked as if he were about to respond with his own first-sex story, but before he could utter a syllable, Shutty interjected a sharp, "You wish."

Before anyone could nervously laugh, an abrupt crack, like a car crash or a firecracker or a heavy stovetop slamming down, made Shutty gasp and turn her head. She thought some bright staccato flashes had briefly lit a corner of the room, but couldn't be sure. In any event, there was nothing there, and not a further sound. The fact that no one else seemed to notice made her wonder if the drug was kicking in already. But it hadn't been more than two minutes since she took the pill—nothing could work that fast, could it?

Even so, a dreamlike wave of unreality buffered her senses. She had the odd feeling of being two places at once—standing where she was, but at the same time lying down, feeling the cold of the floor against her face. But not just the floor, the floor as if it were the bottom of a refrigerator, oozing cold.

The drug. That must be it. Hallucination, auditory and otherwise. Man, that was fast. Too late to worry about being left alone with Kleck now. The door to the unknown was open. When she forced her attention back to the others, though, they didn't seem to have changed at all, and were still talking about swapping tales of virginity lost.

"In your case, it'd be fiction," Jobe said to Kleck.

"Wow, attacking with your brain instead of your fists. Does it hurt?" Kleck answered with mock concern.

If the drug was kicking in, it didn't diminish anger. The thick Jobe finger rose and duly shook at Kleck's

nose. "Some day, you're going to push too far," the jock said in an uncharacteristically earnest tone. Then he turned away.

Kleck was about to follow, either with his body or his words, but Shuttty, surprising herself, put her hand on his shoulder and said, almost into his ear, "Why do you ride him when you know he can beat the crap out of you?"

Kleck was taken aback by the sudden physical contact, but that did not diminish his bravado. "Because I shouldn't *ever* be afraid to say anything. Besides, Bilka will protect me, won't you?"

The tall Russian woman didn't answer. She seemed lost in thought, gently touching her fingers to her left cheek, as though trying to feel an invisible wound.

"*Nam ne nuzhen perevodchik,*" Kleck said with a lascivious smile.

Catching the gist of the flirtatious tone, Jobe stormed back and spun Kleck around. Some line had been crossed. Even Tragic Alex seemed worried.

"What did you say to my girlfriend?"

Kleck rolled his eyes. Jobe shook him violently.

Why isn't Bilka stopping him? Shuttty wondered. *Why aren't I stopping him?*

Kleck smiled and said, "Relax."

The word drained some of the tension. A simple reassurance now that no harm was meant could restore peace. Instead, pupils dilated, Kleck said, "I just said that yes, I saw your boyfriend giving a blowjob to another guy, but it was only once and I'm quite sure he's not gay."

There was another bang, more distracting flashes, and a few visible trails of motion. By the time Shuttty got the room to stand still, Jobe was straddling Kleck, heavy knees wedged in his armpits, preventing him from moving. It almost looked for a second like he was going to force Kleck to give him oral sex. Instead, he started pounding him in the face with his fists, drawing blood.

"*Neel zyaaa! Neel zyaa!*" Bilka screamed in Russian. Catching herself, she said, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Her words had no affect.

Kleck's arms flailed girlishly, hands twisting at the wrist, but his face, his eyes, were neither flailing nor girlish—they were alive with fire, brimming with the feeling Shutty couldn't place before, back when she thought he should have been afraid. Seeing it more clearly now, senses perhaps enhanced by the pigment, she knew she'd been right the first time—it wasn't fear at all, or buried homosexual attraction. It was rage, a bestial frenzy caged in an incompetent body—no, not just bestial, something even lower, deeper than that, lizard fury, reptilian ire—so deep, so low down, it seemed dead, the consequence of a machine. If Kleck had a weapon, he would kill Jobe just as quickly as if he were the computer-generated obstacle to a computer-generated prize. She was so sure of it, it made her shudder.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Bilka screamed again, less fearfully, more firmly. She punctuated each command with a slap of her hand against Kleck's white acrylic desk top. Rather than reverberate like a drum, the sharp sound was muted by the unyielding pressboard. Everything in the room was too solid to allow for vibration. She tried harder—her next slap was so forceful it reddened her palm and made the whole structure, computer, television and all, slide a few inches across the floor toward the wall, but it still wasn't working. Jobe was in his own gorilla frenzy now, and Kleck was the piece of luggage he'd been given to test. The erstwhile host looked like he might soon be unconscious, despite whatever rage was writhing inside him.

Shutty hadn't noticed the door open or close, but it must have, because a slight figure, leaving a swath of beige and white gauzy trails behind it, hurled itself sideways into Jobe with a powerful force that belied its small size.

In an instant, Jobe was winded, sprawled on his back. And silence again filled the small room. The blur of images stood still and coalesced. Shutter could make out a thin, well-built woman—what they call wiry—with short, sharp hair. She couldn't be sure in the dim light of the dormitory lamps, but the woman's hair color seemed a mix of blonde and silver—maybe blonde with silver highlighting, maybe the other way around. Sharp, nearly semi-circular eyebrows, silly-putty cheeks and a puffy nose gave the overall impression of a cheerful marionette. Cheerful, that is, if she would smile, which she did not.

"Thanks, Kate," Kleck said weakly. He wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "I owe you one." Still on the ground, he turned to the room, and grinned. "This is Kate Dennison everyone, a teaching assistant in my Eastern Philosophy class. Knowing her interest in things of a spiritual nature, I invited her, but I guess I just assumed she wouldn't come."

"Spiritual?" Shutter asked.

"Of the spirit," Kleck rephrased.

He stood, perhaps a little too easily, and shook off the wounds and stress of Jobe's attack. Shutter stared at him. She couldn't stop herself. There was something wrong with him. He was different. He seemed older. Not older. Different. Calmer. Not calmer. Different.

Dennison helped Jobe to his shaky feet, all the while apologizing for her blow to his solar plexus. "It's a chakra," she explained, "the center of the will and determination, and a good place to kick someone when they're out of control. Sort of the testicles of the soul."

Jobe grunted, not paying much attention to anything other than his pain and embarrassment, but Shutter laughed. Hearing this, the new woman's sharp eyes centered on her. They weren't unfriendly—they were warm, in fact, but clearly deftly sizing her up.

"That's Shutter," Kleck said.

"Good," was all Kate Dennison said in response. For an instant, Shutter felt as if she were about to be

interviewed for something, but Dennison didn't address her at all. Instead, she stepped closer to Kleck with her tight, trained little body, dressed for comfort in T-shirt and jeans. As if they were the only two in the room, they started speaking to one another in short words and stern tones.

Shutty couldn't make out any of it. In fact, the sound was more like an insect buzzing inside her ear than human speech. The pigment was definitely warping things now, pumping sights, sounds and feelings way out of proportion, especially the sudden jealousy that gripped her. Despite the hallucinogenic veil, as Kate and Kleck continued their furtive chat Shutty swore there was something between them, an odd and terribly intimate energy.

Her feelings confused her. She was annoyed at being ignored, that much she felt clearly and strongly, but the jealousy welling in her didn't make any sense. She didn't want Kleck anymore, not after seeing his creepy rage. Still, believing now that she couldn't have him because this prim and perky T&A TA was already his lover, was cross-circuiting her fragile psyche—sending her crawling back to the good old patterns of the dark and dismal.

"The world holds nothing new," she moaned to herself. Even in her heart of hearts the drug was taking over, larding her insides with trails and echoes. The feelings were so strong, so visual, so tactile, that she really could touch them, push them, prod her finger through them. They felt like thin gauze and looked like animals—the anger a granite elephant, the embarrassment a clinging rubber snake, her lust for Kleck an inky squid whose details faded in and out of its utter blackness as it throbbed.

As she stood there, barely in the room, transfixed by her inner bestiary, something fell into place. With a click, or rather the thud of stone on stone, she realized—saw, in fact—that she really did want to die. She had all along, and did now and forever, quite desper-

ately. That feeling was no animal, it was an angel, arms outstretched, face as sweet as can be, lips vowing unconditional love.

The angel made her smile—maybe this was the blessed relief she'd read about, the peace that came when the decision was finally made. Now it was just a question of time. Maybe she would kill herself in front of them all—hurl herself from the dirty window. Was it high enough? Was she high enough?

Imagining its sharp edges against her skin, she turned to the thick glass to judge the height to the pavement, and to try to count how many thoughts she might have on the way down. But her brow furrowed. There was that SUV again. The exact same one. Still silver, still driving. What was it doing here again? Circling? Who was in it? The driver was impossible to see. Maybe it was another car completely. Or maybe this was the first time she was seeing it, and her mind had only predicted the future before.

There were simpler explanations. There was no dearth of silver SUVs in the city, and one color was as good as another, she supposed. But as it made the same right, at the same yellow light, a rush of paranoia like a wave of locusts took her and snapped her fake green eyes shut. When the sound of the car finally faded from her ears, when she felt comfortable she would again see nothing more than an empty street and the pavement she longed to hurl herself onto, she opened them again—and gasped.

On the glass, next to the first palm print was a second—again, the same size and shape as her own hand. Though this time she could swear she hadn't touched the window at all.

2. AND THE BANDWIDTH PLAYED ON

Human voices, with syllable hands and sentence-long arms, gently pulled Shuttty back into the room, where the feelings took up more space than the people:

"Shouldn't we start? Why are we waiting? It's dangerous to wait."

"Not yet. We have to see the broadcast. Let's remember whose party this is."

"Your *party*? That what you think this is? A party?"

"Whatever. I say we wait, so we wait."

Was *that* what Dennison and Kleck—Kate and Martin—were whispering to each other? Was it? Dangerous how? It was hard to be sure. The pigment (pig-men?) had revealed, or puffed into exaggerated form, every stray thought that happened by. In fact, whatever they'd said, Dennison's displeasure was thick to the touch. She didn't seem to like Kleck, or at least she was angry with him, especially now that he was acting different. But that didn't mean they weren't lovers—her disdain seemed the kind of unbridled disgust one might reserve for those closest.

Yeah, that was it, that was it exactly. Shuttty was having an easy time reading her. It was as though her face had more... well, more *more* to it than the others. Even Kleck, who had the closest type of presence, paled before the clarity of this new woman. Jobe, Bilka and Alex were weaker, shadow things. Dennison was a rock, a statue—part authority, part rebel.

How she hated her, the bitch. Shuttty clamped and ground her teeth so tightly, she feared her molars might crumble beneath the strain. Something rattled, as if ready to explode. A plate against a tabletop, maybe a mug on a bookshelf, but it rattled in tune with her anger. No one else heard it, but she did.

Don't want to spend the time with this! Just want to jump! We're all meat, after all, meat and happenstance. Wouldn't it be sweet to leave the meat behind?

It was a fiery ball of a thought, like a toddler's desire for candy, and it did not like being thwarted.

Shutty turned and saw that elsewhere (but how could there really be an elsewhere in this stifling gray closet?) Bilka was mechanically rubbing Jobe's thick shoulders, trying to reach his wounded pride.

Felled by a short woman in two seconds flat. How did that feel, Mr. Jock?

The Russian apparently was not insensitive to the shift of energy in the room either. While she rubbed, she stared unabashedly at Dennison with wide open, semi-startled eyes, the way a cat might glare at some spot in mid-air, as if seeing an invisible dragon. Jobe winced, both from the pain in his lower stomach and the fact that his girlfriend's attention was not focused on him.

If Bilbo's not going to do anything, I will!

With a swagger, Shutty clomped up to Kleck and Dennison, socks sinking, nose first, imagining herself a thin skeletal ghoul, as ugly as her feelings. She decided not to mention the dusty handprints, they were, after all, hers—nobody else's business. Satisfied that they saw her, she balled up her face, and in an uncharacteristically demanding tone, asked the lithe newcomer, "Why are you here? Are you a friend of Kleck's?"

They seemed surprised, as if an infant or a dog had spoken. Dennison tilted her head left, then right, looking at Shutty completely unselfconsciously, as though regarding her own reflection in a mirror or, worse, a thing rather than another person. She smiled a calm practiced smile and responded, "Not exactly."

There you had it—not exactly. Not exactly friends—then there must be sex involved. Sex or friendship. That was the height and depth of human relations after all, and never the twain could meet. Sex, sex, sex. All is sex and merchandise. Shutty wavered dizzily on the balls of her feet. Dennison noticed at once, and reacted like some sort of paramedic, all helpful, competent and professional.

"Try to breathe into it," Dennison said. "That will make it easier."

"Breathe into what?" Shuttty said, still vaguely angry, her hand shooting up to her forehead, thumb rubbing the hard bony ridge above her eyes. Worried she might be smearing her mascara, she looked up between her fingers, caught a glimpse of the stylized death's-heads that adorned her fingernails, and realized that Dennison's face was deeply blurry. Shuttty thought she might be passing out. No, it was more like reality was.

"The high," that proficient older female voice said. "When you feel yourself starting to freak, concentrate on your breath. Even if you just imagine yourself breathing slowly, it will help. *You* can do it"

The last sentence had an odd emphasis, as if she were saying the *others* couldn't. There was a concrete, all-business quality to the instructions too, a tone utterly drained of compassion that said, "Look, here's the information; do what you want with it." It made Shuttty, despite whatever petty jealousies dogged her, believe.

So she inhaled for the longest time, sucking in the dust, the bad mojo, her conjured animal icons, even a few grim shadows she couldn't identify at all. Then, just when it seemed she'd drawn the whole petty room into her lungs, she let it go. A shimmering cloud gushed forth from her pursed lips—a hallucination, she knew, but that didn't keep her from watching as it spiraled about the room, sweeping past Jobe, Bilka and the others, colliding with the walls, where it dropped and nudged some black shadows behind the cube-like furniture, as if rousing them from sleep.

In fact, one of the shadows tumbled right into Tragic Alex. The moment it touched him he screamed and leapt from his cross-legged squat, nearly up to the ceiling.

Shuttty stopped breathing, more confused than frightened. How could her hallucination touch some-

one? ESP? She'd heard talk of how drugs enhanced psychic phenomena, had a few freaky moments where the phone rang when she asked it to, but nothing like that.

After some breathless moments, the mousy fear drained from Tragic Alex's frozen eyes. He looked down and away—a Superman in reverse.

"Thought I saw..." he mumbled, then he abruptly strode to a different bare patch of floor in another corner of the room. His slow careful strides actually managed to make the space from corner to corner seem larger than it was. He slumped down again, resuming his impersonation of a corpse. Shutty noticed that the shadows didn't seem to want to follow him. Instead, they stayed huddled on the far side of the room, shifting slowly like licorice pudding rolling in a slow boil.

"Kleck," Dennison said, clearly in warning.

For an instant, in the shadows, those large flaps of skin hung down from the side of Kleck's skull again, making him look a bit like a happy, nodding Beagle. All he had to do now was loll his tongue to the side of his mouth.

"Yes, it's time," dog-boy announced, remote control in hand as he deferred for the first time to someone else. Shutty was impressed.

With a crackle of static electricity and a transformer's hum, the television sprang to blessed, gaudy colorful life, welcoming all present to its cool, two-dimensional reality. If nothing else it was another window in the small room. Shutty wondered if she should jump through it, instead of the grimy, hand-printed panes.

The familiar light having pierced the gloom, the college dorm room seemed almost normal again. A deep, cheerful disembodied voice emanated from the speakers: "Tired of wallowing in debt?"

Jobe joked in a falsetto, "Oh no! An infomercial! Save me! Save me! I'm so scared!"

Kleck turned to him wryly. "You know, Jobe, that one was actually mildly amusing. I'll spare you my comeback," he said with regal beneficence.

Dennison wasn't laughing. She wasn't looking at the television at all. She was looking at the room, and at them.

Vibrant text swooped from black nowhere, filling the screen with questions: *Bad Credit? Poor History? Unemployed?* Each one read by the announcer, not because he thought you were stupid, but because he wanted to spare you the trouble of doing it yourself.

"Act now!" the voice enjoined.

Carpe Nocturne, Shuttty thought. *A message from the ad world? Why jump later when you can jump now?*

"What is this...?" Bilka asked, interrupting the television. Her brow had furrowed, marring the smooth white skin of her lovely face.

"Shh!" Kleck said, cutting her off as he moved closer to the set. "Pay close attention. According to my informed sources, who base their facts on rumor, urban legend and hearsay, the great and wonderful 'it' is supposed to start exactly at midnight, which according to my watch, is... now!"

Of course nothing happened. That was to be expected. In fact, the nothing tickled everyone for a bit, especially Jobe. But all kept staring, just the same, except for Dennison, who, Shuttty noticed, seemed to have vanished into a wall.

But why look at Dennison when you've got TV? Especially this one—for Shuttty, the black plastic case of the television seemed to breathe a little. Then it started singing the theme from a cartoon show she remembered as a child, but other than that, nothing really out of the—

Wait a minute.

Vague harsh images, tiny flashing gray-scale squares flared between video frames. Harsh raspy sounds coughed up in the pauses of the announcer's basso profundo.

There really is something there.

"Where are you getting this signal?" Shutter asked.

"Same place as everyone else in the dorm—the satellite dish on top of the building. One of many digitally broadcast MPEG streams decoded by the box," Kleck answered.

"This is stupid," Jobe said, but Bilka clamped her hand to his mouth, as if he'd interrupted the final moment of a gripping murder mystery.

"You all see it, don't you?" Kleck grinned. "The image is degraded. It's traveling on a thin bandwidth, so it underwent a lot of compression, that's why it's so blocky."

"Shut up! Shut up!" Shutter said, before she could catch herself. As long as she was here and doped up, she wanted to see whatever there was to see. And so she did—more flashes and static rattling the speakers. It went on for a total of thirty seconds, then it was back to the regularly scheduled broadcast. Kleck hit MUTE.

"What *was* that?" Shutter asked.

"A ghost," said Tragic Alex.

His head was up and he was standing, looking with soulful, yet ratty, eyes at the screen. "He's talking ghost stuff, warning all the other ghosts about ghost stuff. People think he's a flat-line survivor, you know, from the Orpheus thing."

The sentences were flat, short—puffed out with uncertain breaths. But nevertheless, Tragic Alex was speaking, an event the others in the room took as no less magical than the secret broadcast they'd gathered to watch. There was a moment of silence as Tragic Alex' face assumed the expression of a man who'd suddenly discovered he could fly.

"Orphy-what?" Shutter asked softly.

Of course she'd heard of Orpheus before, she just wanted the donkey to fly again. And it was all the prodding he needed: Tragic Alex reared up, looking all the more to Shutter like a large furry mouse, his beard now a rodent's whiskers, small black eyes open as wide

as he could make them. His face was twisted into a terribly funny caricature of offense that brought to mind the Mad Hatter. He spoke, long, loud and with the sort of emotional fervor that could only be brought on by drugs.

"Orpheus! Orpheus! Where have you been? It's all over the net. They found this drug, developed exercises to help people project themselves as ghosts while they were still alive, and they train them and rent them out to people who want to contact the dead! They used to be a cryogenics facility, freezing terminally ill people so they could bring them back once a cure was discovered. Then they thawed out a few and, like, two said, 'Hey, we weren't dead. We were ghosts, wandering around with all these other ghosts!' And they proved it! They *knew* stuff they couldn't have known! It was, like, an undeniable fact! Orpheus got hot to explore the ghost thing, and Project Bluebook gave them some funding, only they needed a steady supply of dead people they could bring back and study! Death row! So they started this Eyes Only experiment, taking death-row prisoners, killing them, bringing them back, over and over. They figured out that people who had near-death experiences, NDEs, like dying on the operating table, or almost getting on an airplane that crashed, had a sort of predisposition to, I don't know, being ghosts, seeing ghosts, whatever. They started getting pretty good at sending them out and bringing them back into their bodies. But this fire, maybe started by the Air Force spooks in Bluebook, or some ghosts who didn't like Orpheus, killed all their guinea pig prisoners, who're now wandering the world as these angry convict ghosts. One of them hijacks the airwaves at midnight to try and give everyone warnings and shit. C'mon, the freaking Orpheus ghost-hunting commercials are all over the place! You *must* have seen one of them!"

The sudden, enthusiastic burst of language shattered the oppressive atmosphere. Immediately following the first moment of silence that presented itself, every-

one—even Tragic Alex, even Kleck, even Dennison—laughed hard and long.

Bilka nearly choked on her soda as she spat, “Tragic Alex is a secret raconteur! But ghosts?”

Shutty was laughing so hard she could barely speak, but she managed, nonetheless, to issue a husky, “Boo!” before collapsing into such deep-seated paroxysms of the lungs and throat that her diaphragm hurt.

“And what issue of what comic book was all that in?” Jobe said.

Unsurprisingly, Kleck was the first to regain control. “Man, you blew that strong-and-silent-type thing in a major way.”

“None of you *ever* heard of Orpheus?” Tragic Alex repeated, aghast in his oddly mousy way.

“Sure,” Shutty said, her own laughter slowing. “I’ve heard of the Psychic Hotline too, but I don’t give them my credit card number. I mean, it’s just like that stupid show where the guy pretends to talk to the dead, isn’t it? It’s a cheap carnival trick—you say all sorts of stuff really fast until you get a right answer by accident, then you go with it.”

“It’s called cold reading,” Kleck explained with a bit of a nod. “And this is a little different. Well, *maybe* it’s a little different.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Jobe said, waving his hand about as if he had a remote that could pause the conversation. “Kleck, you *believe* this shit? You brought us here to see a ghost on TV?”

“It’s all true,” Tragic Alex assured them. “Just like Roswell. All over the net for you to see. I can send you the links.”

But the fickle group was ignoring him now, more focused on mastermind Kleck, who shrugged and said, “Do I admit to visiting some of the same sites as our laconic friend here? Perhaps. But let’s just say, as a skeptical thinker with a profound, and I think universal, desire to reach out and actually touch the unknowable, I wanted to see if I could get some proof

something's really going on. You were all invited as... witnesses."

"Proof?" Jobe asked. "It was a bunch of static."

Kleck nodded toward his borrowed DVD burner. "I recorded the broadcast, Einstein. Never commit to memory what you can get from another source. Now we play it back, frame-by-frame, and see if anything preternatural pops up. I could have just copied it onto my hard drive, I guess, but that puppy's been acting up lately."

"So you wanted to photograph a ghost," Bilka said. "An admirable ambition." Perhaps she meant it as a joke, but it came across as genuine, flavored with a flirtatious tone that made both Jobe and Shutter shoot her a furrowed-brow glance.

"Tetya, my babushka, had a small, very old ivory statue of the Virgin Mary. She thought the eyes would follow her around the room and the mouth would sometimes move, in prayer. My parents made fun of her, but she always seemed more—what are the words?—comfortable in her skin than my parents did. They were very tense. I liked her and her statue a great deal. I always wanted to see the eyes move, or hear it speak, but I never did. So yes, I'm glad you brought me here and I hope we get to see your ghost."

"You're welcome," Kleck said. Shutter expected him to be taken aback by the possibility that someone liked him or anything he did, but there was no emotion in his voice.

"What about the drugs?" Shutter asked, more to interrupt Bilka than anything else.

"It's the stuff that, like, helps you see the dead," Tragic Alex blurted, as if he were a child who knew the answer to the teacher's question in school and couldn't possibly contain himself. Now that he'd started talking, he was having a hard time remembering how to stop. "Orpheus uses it on their agents, with Kundalini yoga, so they can project themselves as ghosts. That

much is on the television commercials, isn't it? And the pigment is supposed to let you see the ghosts."

Ghosts? Like the shadows? Shuttty wondered.

"Ten points for Gryffindor, Alex," Kleck said, perhaps a bit annoyed at sharing his stage. "Now, for extra credit, can you tell us what black pigment is made from?"

"Oriental poppy extract and peyote in a highly dense protein chain," Tragic Alex answered.

"Wow!" Jobe blurted. "It's like they're freaking aliens from the same planet or something."

"Ah," Kleck said, raising his index finger. "But you left out the extra special secret ingredient."

"What's that?" Tragic Alex asked.

Kleck said nothing. Satisfied he'd won something, he turned away to fiddle with his computer.

Tragic Alex's eyes went wide again, as if he were utterly unaware that Kleck was joking. He sat down, shook his head and said, "Nah."

Shuttty, curious and feeling bad for him, walked up, tapped him on the skull with her thumb and — meaning it in the nicest possible way—said, "Alex, man, you've got a whole amusement park going on in there, don't you?"

She was feeling a little more sober now, part of her awareness riding above the druggy haze of her senses.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Kleck said, his face a little pale. "There's got to be. There's just got to be..."

With a howl of disappointment, he pushed himself away from his computer monitor. Everyone stepped closer.

Where's Dennison? Shuttty wondered. *Where has she gotten to?*

"Giving up on the ghosts so quickly?" Bilka offered.

"Look here," Kleck said, pointing to a small screen on his monitor. Using the mouse, he scrubbed through, one frame at a time. One frame showed the credit commercial, the next, static. Commercial. Static. Commercial. Static.

"There's nothing," he said, profoundly surprised. "Not a fucking thing."

Shutty leaned in for a closer look at the static. For a second, she worried that a brief rub against Kleck might give him the wrong idea, but he was too wrapped up in the machine to notice. As she scanned the motionless mass of black and white pixelation, an uncomfortable warmth overcame her, starting at the base of her spine, working its way up to her shoulders. It brought with it an incredible sense of dread, as if someone huge and powerful were right behind her, just over her shoulder, just out of her view, someone who shouldn't be there at all. Someone who shouldn't *be* at all.

At the same moment, on screen she saw, or thought she saw, a man's face, dark skinned, shadowy, heavyset. A typical talking head, staring out at the audience, made up of little blips and glitches arranged just so, like a visual puzzle her mind had managed to solve—one minute there, the next not, like the lamp-or-two-faces optical illusion. It was a worn face, not weary but experienced, and terribly, terribly determined. She thought for a moment about describing it to the others, to see if they could see it too, but some fear-induced instinct told her she should keep her mouth shut, that it would be dangerous to let the fact that she'd seen it escape from her mind into the world.

"What about *that*?" Tragic Alex said, putting his finger on the monitor, not near the picture at all, but near a small, virtual, waveform monitor.

Kleck looked at it intently, then brightened. "Yeah, *yeah*, in the ambient sound..."

"Time once again for geek-speak," Jobe said, pulling back in a huff. "C'mon, Bilka, I'm getting tired. Let's go to your room and crash."

How odd, Shutty thought, that the notion of actually leaving had never occurred to her.

"No, not yet," Bilka answered absently. "I want to hear what it is."

Jobe stamped his feet, pouted and shuffled back toward the computer.

Bilka turned briefly to him and said, "It's important to me. If there's something there, I want to know it."

They were all bunched around the desk now, bodies pressed together in a proximity that would normally be considered inappropriate. In short order, Kleck, with the rapid blur of his fingers on the keyboard and mouse, manifested something visible on the screen.

"There is something between the silences," he said, enlarging the window. "You can see the peaks and valleys in the wave file, there and there. Maybe an EVP."

"EVP?" Jobe asked with a sigh.

Tired and unable to come down from his high, Shuttty thought, if it isn't something he can eat or fuck, he wants to kill it.

"Alex? Want to field that?" Kleck said as he adjusted some parameters.

"Electronic Voice Phenomena. You use something to record, like, what you think is the silence in the room, play it back, and sometimes you can hear these eerie, raspy voices. Some people think it's..."

"Yeah, the dead. We know. But then this wouldn't be from the broadcast, would it?" Shuttty asked. She'd been around a computer or two herself.

"There was no open mike, so it has to be part of the signal or interference. Let's listen," Kleck said. With a click, he played the section of the file.

There was silence, steady static as Kleck cranked the volume, but then Shuttty heard, plain as day, some harsh distorted scratches that seemed to form the words:

You were right. There's more.

Then came some sharper bursts of static, like fire-crackers recorded at a distance with a lousy microphone, then what sounded like screeching tires, or maybe screams.

Kleck's face went blank. He looked as if he'd heard the voice of God and it had told him, in one sentence, all he'd ever needed to know.

"Everyone hear that?" he asked, wanting confirmation of his senses. Then he laughed, and repeated, louder: "Everyone hear that?"

Jobe nodded, transfixed. "Play it again."

"Maybe you just picked up a horror film on a channel right near it," Shutty suggested. But by the time she finished the sentence, the file was playing again. Only now, it sounded different, saying something like:

Thank you.

"Oh my god! It's the same file, the exact same fucking file, but it *changed*. It's not saying the same thing!" Kleck insisted gleefully.

He played it again:

One for you.

A voice spoke between static.

You crazy bastard, another voice said. Then the flashes again, firecrackers. Screams—just like in the movies, only infinitely sadder.

"Wait a minute, I *know* those voices—that's you and Jobe," Bilka said. Then she turned her pale white face accusingly toward her boyfriend, one eyebrow raised, and said, "Are you trying to trick us? To scare us?"

"No, I swear," said Jobe. "You think that sounds like me?"

"Yeah, if you were trying to sound all spooky," Bilka accused.

"Play it again," Shutty said. She was focused now, feeling adamant.

"I don't know...." Kleck began.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, play it again!" Shutty shouted.

Across the room, inside the dusty bulb of a standard-issue, white-shade-and-black-base lamp, the hair-thin filament snapped with a pop, giving more of the room to shadow. While the others turned to stare

at the lamp, Shuttty grabbed the mouse from Kleck and clicked on the media player. The garbled, undulating hiss filled the air once more:

"Can I really kill them all?"

"Did you hear that?" Shuttty asked, aloud. "Did anyone else hear that?"

"Yeah," Tragic Alex confirmed, "It's *not* saying the same thing twice."

"Of course it's saying the same thing, it's the same file," Jobe shouted, his staid sense of reality deeply offended. "It has to be saying the same fucking thing!" His meaty hand grabbed the mouse and, after some inept gyrations of wrist, palm and index finger, the file played again:

"Please don't! Please!"

"Different again," Shuttty said.

"You're just saying that!" Jobe shouted.

Bilka shook her head. "I heard it too."

Shuttty thought of playing it again, maybe letting more of whatever it was into her head, but as she reached toward the mouse, that feeling of a presence behind her, which had never left completely, grew so thick it became unbearable. Unable to contain herself, Shuttty looked back, wide-eyed, over her shoulder and nearly screamed.

Dennison was standing right there.

"Yeow! When did you get back?" Shuttty said. There was a bit of relieved laughter, blowing off some of the mounting tension.

"Never left," Dennison said matter-of-factly. No one else seemed surprised by her presence. No one else seemed to think she'd even been missing. She lowered her head so her lips were closer to Shuttty's ear. "But if you're so sure it's different, then tell me, what did it say the last two times?"

"Can I really kill them all,' then, 'Please don't. Please," Shuttty answered dutifully, hoping she'd made it all up.

Tragic Alex's face dropped. "Yeah, exactly what I heard. Exactly. Oh, wow."

"Get out, get out—that's not possible, not possible," Jobe said.

Shutty noticed how he'd fallen to repeating nearly everything he said, in the hope that would somehow make his words more real, like a chant or an evocation. Bilka drew near, put her lips next to Shutty's ear and whispered frantically, "To me it spoke in Russian and told me to leave here at once."

It was all too much.

"Then, why don't you?" Shutty answered, her heart pounding, pushing adrenaline through her system. "Why don't you just get out? Why don't we *all* just leave?"

Another bulb shattered, there was more darkness, and all at once, she felt quite alone.

Apropos of nothing, in the sudden sense of solitude Shutty remembered a novel she'd often thought of writing—it would consist of a series of short stories that would all start with the same event, but owing to slight differences in the actions of the characters, each variation would be longer than the last, more encompassing, leading to deeper lives and deeper meanings. The overall effect would be one of spiraling ever outward, opening up to bigger and bigger worlds, rather than, as she saw the problem both with most novels and with herself, crashing inward in a dark claustrophobic solipsism.

Her greatest fear was that her own life was just like that first, oh so very short, oh so very predictable story, with no chance ever to do any of it over with wider eyes, no chance to ever obtain a different result.

She returned to the room, as if to haunt her own body. The demonic sense of presence came with her. One by one, Shutty accounted for everyone in the room, and none matched the feeling.

Then she heard the ghostly rush of a fine-tuned engine and the hiss of steel-belted tires sloshing across

slick pavement. Though she didn't see it, she knew the silver SUV was outside again, riding down the same street, in the same direction. She did not look, she would not look, but still she knew it was there—making the same twin lines on the rainy street, braking exactly the same way at the same changing light, then turning wide into the far lane, exactly as it had before, with all the same sights, sounds and reflections.

The only thing she didn't know for certain was whether or not there was a third handprint on the window. But there was no way she could move her head, or her feet, or even bend down to adjust her damned oversized white socks. She was, for the moment at least, petrified.

This is ridiculous! I'm suicidal anyway! What the fuck is there for me to be afraid of?

So she managed to turn toward the window.

A numbing cold warbled through Shutty as if it were a piece of ice forced by pressure through a too-small rubber hose. She hoped the sudden chill would kill her, so she wouldn't have to see a single damn thing more, but no such luck.

And yes, the third handprint was there—a pretty, nigh invisible, white relief on gray glass, made of dust and moisture—full of the distinctive skin-lines that adorned all palms and fingers. Some were like little rivers and tributaries, others like cracked dry earth, still others straight bands, slashing across the joints.

3. I HEAR YOU KNOCKING, BUT
YOU CAN'T COME IN

One. Two. Check out my shoe. Three. Four. Head for the door.

Ah, yes. The door. It was still there, after all, metal windowless thing that it was, waiting like the slab at the head of a grave, mysterious as the monolith from that old Kubrick film. But for some reason, for whatever reason, she just couldn't keep the notion of leaving in her head. Kleck's room had become the whole world.

And what was there, really, to be afraid of? Handprints? Some nightmare voices in the air? A senseless sense of doom when doom was all she craved?

What is fear, anyway? Shutty wondered. She huddled tightly inward, imagined arms wrapped tightly around imagined self, in the secure but utter darkness of her closed-eye womb.

Darkness? Is that it? What you can't see? What you can't know?

Someone had once told her that the opposite of a small truth was a lie, but the opposite of a big truth was another truth. So maybe fear wasn't darkness, maybe it was really too much light—being convinced that you do know what will happen, but that you can't ever stop it. Maybe it was like watching a ball roll slowly down a hill, too far away to reach in time, but knowing without question, without doubt, that when it hit bottom everything everywhere would absolutely end in a way far more painful than could ever be guessed. And there you are, just watching it roll end over end, pulled by unwavering gravity—totally, unequivocally unable to stop it. You can't even turn away.

That's fear, the dark girl figured. Not being able. Wanting, needing, as desperate as desperate could be—but not being able. The very definition of her life.

You can go now, her inner voice whispered, signaling an end to the impromptu consult with her higher self. *The door is calling.* But she didn't want to. It felt safer

here with her eyes wide shut, and she had so many more questions, like: *Where could I go? And, For how long?* Then it was too late. The opportunity was squandered. The tyranny of the room rushed back in.

"Remember to breathe," said that steady instructive voice, containing just a hint of command. It was Dennison, she realized, but Shuttty couldn't tell where in the room she was speaking from.

"Got it yet, Bilka?" Kleck was saying. Him, she could see, standing behind his black-and-white coffin desk, half hidden by the low wall of green, black and silver computer guts and the blank stare of his twin monitors. They were partners now, Kleck and Bilka, in this action. Why wasn't Jobe upset? Didn't he care anymore?

"Perfect," Bilka said, as she freed the small worn box that was tightly packed twixt paperback books with her index finger. "Perhaps these will help shed light on our great mystery, yes?"

It was a tarot deck.

"Whoa," Shuttty said, shaking her head so quickly it sent the strands of her black hair swinging. Her voice even jumped an octave. "Things can speak through those. It gives them voice, like a Ouija board. Aren't you afraid you'll conjure whatever's here?"

"No," Bilka shrugged dreamily, still enjoying her high. "As you say, it's already here. And if it is here, I want to see it. Besides, what is it that a ghost can do? Its time is over. Its power is gone. It's already had its turn to live, no?"

"What if it doesn't see it that way? What if it doesn't play fair? Do you really know what a ghost can do? Those commercials say they can be pretty dangerous," Shuttty insisted.

"So now you're a TV fan too." Bilka smiled. "You believe in the spirits?"

"No. Yes. I mean, I don't know," she squeaked, afraid she might actually cry. "But what if we, like, make it stronger by paying attention to it? You know,

help it manifest? Maybe some things are only real if you acknowledge them. Seeing them makes them real. Feeling them makes them real. So maybe we shouldn't. Maybe we should all just leave now."

Until the tears began to well, Shutter hadn't realized how naked she was. The vaunted life experience of her ages-old twenty years had clicked off in mid-beat like a song on the radio when the power was cut. The façade of ennui, smart remarks and disdain that buffered the material world had been sucked away in that quiet moment she'd had with herself. Now she was a piker, a child, a little girl, her vulnerability raw like an open wound.

She couldn't bury her instincts any longer, whether they were just from her animal body or from some unseen area of her psyche that still valued survival. Planning to take her own advice, she stepped quickly toward the door. She could see there was some tape hanging on it and a small bit of paper, part of an old poster that'd been torn away. For some reason she could clearly imagine what the poster had looked like, but then the image faded. Halfway to the exit she felt her right sock bunch up, and with an annoyed groan, bent over to pull it up.

"It's okay, it's almost over," a calm, steady voice said. Shutter snapped her head up. It was Dennison again. Taking command. Issuing orders. Shutter filled with revulsion and frustration. The next thing she knew, the woman, seemingly out of nowhere, was actually stepping up to her and putting...

Her hand on my shoulder!

No, not quite on her shoulder, but almost. Dennison's hand hovered ever so slightly above the black cloth of Shutter's old tuxedo jacket, but it felt the same, just as violating, as if she'd leapt in front of her to block her path.

Then something happened.

A wave of electric warmth passed between them. Dennison noticed immediately, it seemed to hurt her,

but despite wavering on her feet, she didn't pull back. Kleck noticed it, too. He seemed annoyed, even angry.

All at once, little naked-dressed-in-costume Shuttty couldn't care less what Kleck or Dennison thought. Inexplicably, whatever self-consciousness there was in her collapsed in a gush of terror-induced bravado. Whether it was a new wrinkle to the pigment high, or she'd suddenly got fed up with the whole scene, didn't matter either. It didn't matter at all. If this was to be death, if this was to be the end, then so be it. She would not face it as a child or an awkward image-obsessed teen.

She slapped Dennison's hand out of the way. Hard. (Or had Dennison moved it before she could reach?)

"You mean you're not going to laugh and tell us we're being silly? You *believe* all this?" Shuttty demanded.

"Not exactly *believe*," Dennison said slowly, with that enveloping voice of hers.

From behind Shuttty, Kleck growled, "Not too much, not too quickly."

"Try not to enjoy this, Martin. It gets you stuck in all the wrong places," Dennison shot back. "And if you keep getting stuck, sooner or later Daddy may not be around to pull you out."

"What the fuck are you two talking about?" Shuttty shrieked, astonished at her own abrupt energy. Her hands balled into fists and her elbows locked, leaving her taut arms straight at her sides. She beat her thighs rhythmically as she spoke, and the pounding made her feel as though she were making the whole room rattle. From the look of those listening to her, perhaps she was.

"What does all this *not exactly* shit mean? If it's not exactly this, what is it exactly? I'm scared, okay? I'm fucking terrified, and I don't need anybody trying to mind-fuck me right now. Understand? Scared!" she howled.

There was a brief silence. Bilka strode into it and said, "Cards, anyone?" The lean Russian struck a caricature of a seductive pose, the tarot deck held lazily in her open hand. The image looked horribly familiar, like it was a famous painting or something, though Shutter couldn't possibly have seen it before.

Instincts were clicking off the consequences of the moment. Like that ball rolling down the hill, something dangerous was about to happen, and it had to do with the cards and with Bilka. She didn't know what exactly, or why, or if she could stop it. But she suddenly knew she had to try.

Shutter stepped up and grabbed the pack. "I'll do it."

Bilka released it without a fight, and noting a difference in the slight girl, said, "Look at you, you're glowing. What are you, a witch now?"

"I don't think tarot should be left to amateurs," Shutter explained.

"But I thought you were terrified," Bilka prodded. "What is in your heart?"

Shutter sat in the middle of the floor, cross-legged, and nodded curtly at Dennison. "Why don't you ask *her*? She seems to know all about it. In fact, since the Celtic spread I'm familiar with requires a subject, why don't we use her? What do you say, Kate? Lucky in love, lucky at cards?"

Glaring, Shutter split the deck and shuffled in Dennison's direction, loudly as she could, hoping to summon her to the floor. The older woman had backed off and was standing, again, against the room's brick wall, near the shadows that had nudged Tragic Alex. It was as if she were the Good Witch of the East, holding the unpredictable munchkins of the dead at bay.

"Someone else might be more useful," Dennison said in a tone that would brook no challenge.

"Not me," said Jobe in a funny, dry-throated whisper.

"That's true. To my knowledge, Jobe's never been useful," Kleck said.

Bilka laughed. Shutter knew it wasn't the joke, it was Jobe's lack of an angry response. The jock's silence indicated just how spooked he was and Bilka obviously got some sort of cruel kick out of seeing him that way.

"What about you then, Kleck?" Shutter asked. "It's your party."

Kleck smiled a smug little Kleck-smile. "I'd rather none of you knew my future. It would ruin the surprise."

Shutter was about to draw the cards for herself, or for whatever entity was visiting them, when the forgotten Tragic Alex wobbled across the floor, not standing, looking the part of a legless panhandler. He settled opposite Shutter and rocked slightly back and forth on the base of his spine.

"You? Unafraid, Tragic Alex?" Shutter asked.

He shook his head. "Horried, barely able to move. My heart is pumping a thousand miles a minute. The suspense is unbearable. I hope it lasts," he said.

"Indeed, Tragic Alex," Kleck said bitterly, "Is there no end to the magic that is you?"

"Now, now, Marty," Shutter said. "I did ask you to the dance first."

Kleck did not respond but he was clearly not appeased. There'd been a silent power struggle between him and Dennison. Now, in the last few minutes, perhaps since she'd grabbed the deck, Shutter had become a third player in the unnamed game—and he didn't like it at all. He paced the three-foot length of his desk, like a caged tiger. A small, utterly inconsequential caged tiger. Though the sadism of human relations generally disgusted her, Shutter couldn't keep from indulging in a bit of Schadenfreude.

"Okay, let's try to focus. We're about to try to bring something in from without. Not just in from out of the room, but from the outside to the inside of ourselves, understand? Reality is about where you put the boundaries," Shutter said, settling down into her full witchy mode. "Everything is, after all, connected, and it can

either grow outward into space, or fall in on itself and collapse.”

It was a pagan power 'tude she hadn't worn so fully since high school, but it slipped on with such ease she wondered why she'd ever abandoned it. Then she remembered—Oh yes, the drugs. Oh yes, the suicide attempts. Oh yes, the black well she'd found in herself on those little trips to death's domain, where the predictions sometimes became all too accurate. She thought for a moment that taking the cards from Bilka may have been a mistake, that whatever doom she had saved them from may not have been as bad as the one she would now unleash—but it was too late, the cards were mixed.

She nudged the deck along the floor toward Tragic Alex.

“First we snag a bit of your essence. Shuffle the cards until they feel right, then cut them into three piles,” she instructed.

Tragic Alex shuffled, then quickly cut the piles, talking all the while.

“You know what helps me? Realizing that most of your fear is really old, right? Not new, not now, old. Every time you experience, like, a real traumatic terrifying event, there's this thick knot of neurons in your brain called the amygdala. When you're scared, it triggers this rush of hormones that sears the horrifying images into your brain forever. So, like, you can never, ever forget the worst things that ever happen to you, because they're permanently hardwired into your brain so you see them over and over and over. Kind of like hell, kind of like hell, kind of like hell. Do you think maybe that's where the idea of hell came from?”

No one was really listening.

Shutty scooped up the piles—first the middle, then the right, then the left—making the severed deck whole again.

“Most people just take the top cards, but this wicked-powerful Wiccan once taught me to take every seventh.

So, first, we pick the significator, a card that will represent you," Shutty explained.

She counted six cards and revealed the seventh: It was Death; the mocking, beckoning skeletal horseman, with his lovely banner of black rose; staring out while plague-ridden bodies gasped their last breaths at the feet of his powerful steed. Everyone recognized it.

"Maybe we should stop," Dennison said, tensing.

"Well, isn't that predictable?" Shutty said, ignoring her. "Let's try again."

"Wait. Aren't you supposed to use the first card you get?" Bilka asked, chiming in with her limited knowledge of things arcane.

"Dealer's choice, and I'm dealing," Shutty answered. Breaking the other rules, she mixed the cards herself, cut them herself, and counted off six again. This time, she held the seventh close to her chest so no one else could see. There it was again—the Death card.

Fuck you, ghost, she thought, and took the sixth instead.

"Ah, the Knight of Wands, a fiery, virile young man, headed boldly toward the future."

As she snapped the card down, a ceramic coffee mug fell to the gray floor and shattered. Shutty didn't even turn to look, but something whispered in her ear:

Fuck you, Shutty.

Ignoring it, she locked eyes with Tragic Alex: "Do you want me to go on?"

Tragic Alex said nothing.

"Do you want me to go on?" she repeated.

"Yeah! Yeah! Do it!" Tragic Alex said, bracing himself as if he were about to take his first bungee plunge.

"No, enough!" Dennison said, stepping toward the center of the room. "There's something we have to tell you, there's something you have to understand."

Kleck grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her forcibly back. "No. Not yet."

"This is not a game!" Dennison screamed at Kleck. "This is not your party, these are not your toys!"

"This is not what we agreed! You know the terms of the arrangement!" Kleck shouted back. Everyone, silent, stared at them, everyone except Shutter. She was too busy staring at something even stranger. A shadow over Alex's shoulder, previously blocked by Dennison, had caught her eye. It seemed to be moving by itself.

"Things are starting to notice us!" Dennison protested. "It's too dangerous to wait. We have to move!"

Dennison's voice faltered a bit. Kleck dove into the hesitation: "Look at you! You're weak! You let that bitch drain you! You're barely here! You're in no position to call the shots!"

The shadow *was* moving. Was it Dennison's? No, the light was wrong. It belonged to no one other than itself, just like the shadow she'd thought she hallucinated, the one that barely touched Tragic Alex. Maybe it was the same one. Maybe it was back, and it was ready to try to touch him again.

"No, it was an accident. I don't know how..." Dennison explained.

Shutter spoke, and though her voice was considerably softer and more uncertain than the arguing duo, the urgency in it made them stop and turn toward her.

"Kate," was all Shutter said.

They saw her face, they saw her eyes and they snapped their heads toward what she was staring at.

Two huge black pincers, about the length of human arms but three times as thick, dripping black smoky gauze, rose on either side of Tragic Alex. Between them, nested in the dark, lay a horribly mangled face, vaguely human, but in place of a mouth was the hard bone beak of some vile predatory bird. Not content to simply dwarf Tragic Alex, it rose higher still, growing as fast as steam might fly from the snout of a boiling kettle, but without the sound, all of it in shades of obsidian that begged not to be seen.

Worse still, Tragic Alex, as real as Shutter had been, as real as any of them, had himself become darker, transparent, not quite in the room. Proximity to the thing was making him more like it, and as he turned and saw it coming for him, all his mousy qualities magnified a thousand times. His humanity was nearly buried, save for the terror in his rat-like eyes.

Before anyone could move, it, whatever it was, took hold of Tragic Alex, whatever he was, and began shredding him bit by bit, as if he were some paper wrapping that had gotten in the way of a single piece of food. It all unfolded in a dreadful silence until belief finally took hold of the victim and a screeching, rodent-like whining erupted from Alex's snout.

Dennison, still staggered and weak, pivoted on one foot and lunged for the shadow, crying, "Kleck! Help me!" But Kleck didn't move—he just kept staring, his face filled with a grim fascination that Shutter took for sick pleasure. Thinking she might do something herself, Shutter grabbed for Alex, hoping to pull him away, but his arms had become thin and bony. She pulled harder, but with an audible click one came loose in her hands, then vanished, or evaporated, from between her fingers.

Dennison bowled into the shadow, just as she had so effectively with Jobe when she first entered the room. But this thing repulsed her easily, raking the side of her head with one of its pincers. Apparently the group's only protector, she slumped to her knees and struggled to rise.

By the time Shutter looked back from the fallen TA, there was barely any trace of Tragic Alex left. Once his furry mouth was gone, there was no more shrill screaming. The few white toilet-paper shards of his being that remained vanished into wisps of smoke, then nothing.

The lobster shadow thing turned toward Shutter. She scuttled backwards on her hands and feet like a crustacean herself, moving so quickly she banged the back of her head against the wall. All the while in the

background, as if a million miles away, Dennison was shrieking at Kleck from the floor, "Do something!"

He tried to ignore her, to disobey, his face locked in a terrible sneer, eyes livid with the subbeast Shutty had first seen in Kleck's encounter with Jobe. Finally, just as Shutty had folded herself into as small a shape as possible, just as the pincers were inches from her shoes and sagging socks, Dennison opened her mouth, arched her neck forward and let loose a piercing wail.

Shutty might have called it a scream, or a screech, but it was more than that, it was a giant fist of wind driven by the force of Dennison's being. It crashed into the lobster thing, sending tiny pieces of its edges flying across the room like bits of dried grass in a gale.

That got its attention. It turned from Shutty to face the source of the attack. By the time it rose up, sticky and lobster-like, Dennison cried out again, this time blowing a chunk of its midsection free, whereupon it, like Tragic Alex had before, collapsed into nothing.

Shutty was in shock, but not breathing quickly. Perhaps she wasn't breathing at all. Bilka was soundless, immobile. Jobe was on the bed, bobbing back and forth, his head vibrating as he nervously laughed an utterly mad laugh.

Dennison, clearly staggered, so weak her very form seemed to waver, nevertheless remained strident as she said hoarsely to Kleck, "I don't know if I can safely maintain my OBE anymore. Inform these PLEs of their condition, now!"

Still laughing, hysterical, Jobe sang, to the tune of *The Mickey Mouse Club* theme song: "PLE, OBE, F-U-K-E-D!"

"Fuked," Shutty babbled, pronouncing it *fooked*. "What does fuked mean?" She was unwilling to hear what came next and hoped that if she just kept talking, she could delay it indefinitely. "Do you mean fucked? Did you misspell fucked?"

"Tell them!" Dennison said again.

"They're not ready!" Kleck called back.

"Tell them or I will!" Dennison said.

Kleck had that flash in his eyes again, but Dennison apparently had him somehow pinned. He gritted his teeth and nearly spat, "Go ahead. You explain to Orpheus."

Dennison turned to the shaky trio that remained and baldly, plainly announced, "You're dead."

Jobe's big brow furrowed, enhancing his vague resemblance to an ape. "You mean, like we're too tired?"

"No," Kleck shouted, as if speaking louder would somehow make him clearer, "Deceased! Dead! Gone to meet your makers! Just like the parrot in the Monty Python sketch, you fucking idiot! And you've been playing out your last day, over and over, for about a month!"

Dizzy, Shutter ran, not for the door but for the window, pressing her face against it. She was comforted that she could still feel its coolness against her cheek. Trying to shake Kleck's words loose from her head, she pulled slightly back.

The SUV was in the street again, making its sad rush for the green light, and in the dust, one after another, one atop another, were the shapes of dozens and dozens of hands, all with fingers, palms, and prints identical to her own.

4. IF THIS IS THE REVEAL, DOES THAT MEAN THERE WAS A VEAL?

The gray rainbow of Shuttty's emotions bubbled and boiled—fear, regret, sadness and more. Yet all were overshadowed by a single dominating thought. It was born just below her consciousness, but soon grew far too swollen to completely ignore: If this was death, why had she wasted so much precious time longing for it? It was, after all, as far as she could tell, not all that different. There was no release from pain, no comfort and not so much as the memory of an ending.

What a waste being suicidal had been. What a deep, ungodly waste of wanting.

Staring down through her black shoes to the dull, scratched plastic sheen of the gray tiled floor, she realized how little, how very little, death had changed her. That was it, then. She'd been stuck with herself, she was still stuck with herself, and despite her hopes to the contrary, as far as she now knew she would always be stuck with herself.

Then a glint of brown crust and white cardboard box caught her eye.

"Was it... was it something in the pizza?" Shuttty asked quietly.

"No," Kleck said, unable to conceal his deep-seated glee. "It was something in this."

Then she heard him say to the thin air, "You can kill them all now."

And he answered himself, quite politely, "Thank you."

The grinning Kleck drew an automatic rifle, as if he'd pulled it from the thickening air, then leveled it at Jobe's head.

"One for you," Kleck said.

"You crazy bastard!" Jobe cried as the trigger was pulled. The loud firecracker bang, the flash, the recoil, Jobe's perfect body led backwards through the air by his

own shattering skull—all of it was disgustingly familiar, one of the last steps in a nightlong dance that had somehow never acknowledged its own end.

“You killed us,” Shuttly said, stating the obvious.

Still smiling, Kleck pointed the rifle at her.

“Can I really kill them all?” he grinned.

Shuttly’s body, or whatever it was now, made ready to respond the way it had every night for four weeks or more. She could feel the features of her face prepare to disintegrate from the forthcoming onslaught of high-speed lead.

“Please don’t! Please!” she heard herself say, disgusted she would beg at the last. But then a voice pierced the faded playback, “You don’t have to go through this again!”

This time, rather than an intrusion, the forceful tone was a lifeline. Somehow, Shuttly grabbed onto it and pulled herself back.

The room was different now. Most of the bad furnishings were gone. Dennison was here, still weak, still struggling to stand. Even Jobe was back, sitting on the bed, cradling his head in his hands, though the death wounds seemed faded. He was crushed that—for all his honed physicality, which had earned him prize after prize, both in sports and socially—he’d been unable to prevent his own destruction by a metal slug set in motion by the index finger of a pathetic geek. This shattered his ego. No more the bully, no more the chosen son, he wept like a lost babe. It looked as if even Kleck pitied him.

Bilka wrapped a long arm around Jobe, mechanically comforting him as she also wept.

Enraged, Shuttly grabbed Kleck and spun him around, but an odd effect followed. Part of him still had the gun, part of him was still firing in the room—flash, flash, flash, body, body, body—but another part of him had turned to face her.

“You killed us!” she said again.

“Uh, yeah.” Kleck said.

Shutty's upper lip rose into a snarl. She shook her head, never once moving her gaze from Kleck's mad eyes. Shedding rage, she let a single question bubble to her lips. It erupted with no added angst save an inflamed sincerity.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I'm a fucking fruitcake, Shutty. Have been for years. I figured it was all like a movie or a game, and if I could just get to the end, I'd wake up in the theater with the lights going on, and everything would be real again. I mean, haven't you ever even considered the possibility that life is just a dream? Come on, you know you have."

"Yeah, but I never placed any bets on it! Why didn't you just kill yourself?"

In an odd reversal, Kleck looked at her as if *she* were crazy. "I never thought I wasn't real. Just the rest of you. Of course, now I have to admit it doesn't look as if I was right about all that, but at the time... well, I got the word. It was like a last chance, when I invited you all over. If I hadn't gotten the word, you all would have gone home that night. That was the rule, the unbreakable rule. No word, no death. But I did, I got the word. So... boom! Ha-ha-ha."

"What word? What do you..." Shutty began. Then she realized what he was talking about, as clearly as if she could read his twisted mind. She nodded toward the computer system, only now noticing she could see through it as well. "The ghostly voices. The EVPs."

Kleck nodded.

"You were right, there's more," Shutty repeated.

Kleck shrugged. "That was all I needed. It proved there was something I had to wake up from. And when it didn't work, when the game didn't end—I did blow my own brains out. That, as you can see, didn't exactly work out either. I've been rethinking things a lot since then, and I just want to say I'm really sorry."

Shutty's brow furrowed, her eyes crinkled into slits. She realized she might just as well be talking to the Death card, or the ocean, or a bug.

She pushed Kleck out of the way, but he had his gun again. He fired at her, through the face. But the ghost bullets simply passed through her ghost flesh, and she ignored it all. Instead, she stared at Dennison and all at once felt a strange distance between them as though, despite being mere feet away, they were shouting at one another across a chasm, fading into and out of the realms of each other's senses.

"He's dead, but you—you're not. You're still alive," Shutter said.

"Yeah." Dennison nodded, as if to say, "Go on. You're getting it."

"But you can see us. You're kind of like us."

"I'm an Orpheus agent, what they call a skimmer, trained to project my will, to become, for lack of a better word, a short-term ghost. Not everyone comes back like you four. Sudden, violent deaths make it more likely. Even then most spirits are weak, not able to function much, sometimes helplessly repeating their last living memories."

"The tarot reading?" Shutter said. "Was that part of it, too?"

"You are good. Bilka did the tarot readings that night. You changed it, broke the pattern. And my presence is new. I came here with Kleck, to try to ease you all into the truth, to clear you, to set you free."

"Ease us? We're dead! How do you ease somebody into that?" Shutter said.

"Wrong choice of words. But if we had just told you, you wouldn't have believed us. The timing had to be right. Listen carefully, Shutter. Spirits hold energy, and there are ways we transfer it to each other. Usually that takes training, but when I touched you, you sucked some from me, like you were hungry for it. That's when you started breaking the pattern—and I think that's what brought the unfriendly. We see them a lot, too—feral ghosts. They seem drawn to scenes of tragedies or to certain people, people who've been close to death, who've seen all this before. Like you."

"What do you mean?"

Dennison was hesitant, uncertain how to explain. Whatever energy Shuttty had drained from her had weakened her, and her battle with the thing that ate Tragic Alex had sapped her even more. "Never mind that now. It isn't safe here. We've got to..."

A plaintive sound cut her off, like a dog being slowly run over. It was Jobe. At first Shuttty thought his weeping had simply reached a crescendo, but his face was wrong. He was staring down at the space between his legs, just under his crotch, where an inky blackness was pooling. Bilka had apparently seen it first. Like Jackie Kennedy in the limo with John on Dealy Plaza, she was doing her best to put as much distance as possible between herself and her besieged lover. She raced across the room, slammed into the door and tried to open it, only to quickly realize it would not budge.

The thing rising beneath the hapless Jobe continued to swell until its mass lifted the youth. In its shades of black and gray, Shuttty could make out more features: a cat's eye, dripping mammalian claws, gaping and bleeding holes in its head, a machete lodged in its chest. It was as if this new thing were hopelessly trying to recall what it once had been, but the memory had long ago been replaced by nightmare. Jobe tried to leap away but couldn't. He was literally surrounded by its form. Trying to get the leverage to move only pressed him further into the thing.

And then Jobe, powerful Jobe, mighty Jobe of great muscle and sinew but little brain, was tossed about the room like a half-inflated basketball.

When Shuttty was a child, her wrinkled Aunt Yotie had an ancient fox terrier named Toya whom she teased with a small stuffed monkey. The dog hated the simian doll. Whenever Yotie presented it, Toya would snarl fiercely. Everyone watching would cackle at the dog's pointless rage. As Toya's confused frenzy peaked, Yotie would make the monkey doll, with its sightless button eyes, dance ever closer, irking and scaring the

dog more and more, until finally Toya, literally backed into a corner, would snap at it. At the last minute, Aunt Yotie would snatch the doll out of harm's way, further frustrating the old canine, who would proceed to whimper and whine. At this, everyone would laugh all the harder, even Shuttery.

That is, until the final game. Maybe ever-aging Yotie didn't move quite fast enough, or the old terrier somehow found just a bit of extra energy and speed, or perhaps realization just erupted in its small sub-wolfish brain that something else was making the horrible hated doll move. In any event, on that last day Toya lunged, not for the doll but for the hand. The terrier snagged Aunt Yotie's dry, wrinkled index finger between its saliva-drenched incisors and bit down hard, nearly severing the bone. As Aunt Yotie wailed, Toya, her mouth dribbled with her master's thick blood, grabbed the monkey doll and shredded it with a blurred fury that sent pieces of felt flying through the air like feathers. Toya was put to sleep the next day. Yotie lived another decade but thereafter had trouble holding so much as a pencil.

In a grim echo of that memory, with equal fury, Jobe was tossed about the room in the grip of unseen teeth. His limbs twisted and folded this way and that, no longer quite corporeal, looking every bit like that poor monkey doll, minus the blood.

"Do something! Save him!" Shuttery shouted at Dennison.

Dennison wobbled and wavered. The Orpheus agent was weaker than Shuttery had guessed. When it looked as though Denison's knees would buckle, Shuttery rushed up to support her, nearly flying there. She found her weird to touch, like gauze.

"There is something you can do, isn't there? Something you could have done for Tragic Alex, but it was too late and you were too surprised." Shuttery whispered to her, again trying to match the confidence she'd once heard in Dennison's voice.

Dennison nodded. She gritted her teeth and shouted. The sound was wet and pained this time, as though a final death cry. Once it was let loose into the room, Dennison all but crumpled into Shutter's arms.

The thing was staggered and annoyed, but nowhere near dissuaded or destroyed. It wavered between targets, but must have decided it was having too much fun with what was left of Jobe. Shutter scanned the room for a weapon, but all she could see was Kleck, standing there gawking like a moronic clown, his phallic rifle held close.

"Shoot it, you idiot!" Shutter cried to him.

Kleck turned to her. "Are you kidding?" he objected. "The gun's not real. It's a projection, same as the bullets."

"Then project some of your fucking bile in its direction!"

"No way!" Kleck said. "Let it eat him. I've never seen anything like that before."

Fed up, Shutter raked Kleck in the face with her long black nails, and made a grab for his gun. Surprisingly, the scratch hurt him. He staggered backwards in pain. She couldn't be sure if she'd actually grabbed something from him, or if the gun in her hands had somehow formed from the air. In any case, the thing felt odd in her hands, out of proportion, as if fashioned more from her frantic thoughts than any sort of material. Having little choice, she aimed and fired.

Bullets, or something like them, flew through the air, crashing into the thick shadowy substance of the thing Dennison had called an unfriendly, zipping out the other side, carrying pieces of it in long silvery trails. At first it didn't seem to notice, but then, tossing Jobe onto the bed, it turned toward Shutter and made a noise that sounded more like stone grating on stone than any grunt, howl or bark a living creature might make.

Shutter closed her eyes and kept firing. The rifle chugged in her hand, spitting out a stream of short fast projectiles. The grating sound grew in volume and

peaked. She sensed a heaviness in front of her—exactly like the earlier grim presence that dogged her—and assumed the thing was mere inches away. A blast of hot air hit her face and seemed to make her very form wobble like a piece of rubber.

Silence followed.

When Shuttty opened her eyes the thing was gone, and Kate Dennison was back on her feet, dragging herself toward Bilka, who remained crumpled by the door.

"I have backup in the hall. They should have come in by now. I don't know what's going on with them, but I can guess it's not good," Dennison said. "But I came here to clear you and that's what I'm going to try to do."

She reached out to Bilka. "Take my hand, please. Don't be afraid. It will all be over soon."

Bilka reached out, arm and fingers shaking. Calm and steady, Dennison drew her closer, close enough to whisper in the Russian's ear. "There's nothing holding you here. You know that now. Kleck is dead. He shot himself. Your responsibilities have ended. All of that's over with."

Bilka shivered and shook, as if her life forces were vibrating free in drips and drabs from her ethereal substance. Draining, she bent forward and down into the shorter woman's embrace, huddling close to her in search of what Shuttty could only guess was strength and warmth. Dennison just kept whispering, with a conscious steady compassion and a tone that grew softer and softer as her lips pressed next to Bilka's ear and, finally, touched it. Still, Shuttty could hear every word: "What is it you believe in, darling? What is it? It's okay, whatever it is. Don't be afraid. Just talk."

"Atheists. My parents were atheists," Bilka said, ashamed. She straightened a bit, to wipe the tears from her face. "They were raised under the communists. Everything was material to them. But, me, all my life I knew there was something more...."

No one really noticed just when it started, but a light began washing the gloom. There was no source

Shutty could see. It was more like everything just started glowing, pink and warm, like the tacky painted light bulbs that provided a “true-daylight” effect. Shutty searched for a word to describe it, but the only one she could come up with was the one she liked least of all: holy. She thought it looked holy. But more than that, it seemed the perfect answer to Bilka’s spirit, the response to her call. It was Bilka’s light.

The radiance focused on the Russian, bathing her pale complexion, making her seem more healthy and alive than she had, in fact, in life. Smiling, Bilka choked back some tears. “I don’t have to guess about it any more, or hope. Here it is, the heart of the universe, waiting for me!”

Gently pulling away from Dennison, Bilka wrapped herself in her own luminance. Her features, blissfully happy, started vanishing into light. First the texture of her skin, her face, then the harder edges of her form: the fingers, the bits of cloth that surrounded her, her arms, legs, torso and head—everything went pink and bright. For an instant, it was as though Bilka had become a giant, beatific smile.

There was no pop, or switch or sound. One moment she was there, like a light bulb, then the cool darkness of the dorm room returned, minus one of its occupants.

Dennison straightened, seeming stronger and more at ease, as though Bilka’s passing, or whatever, had rejuvenated her. Kleck was off in a corner, nursing his wounded face. Shutty glanced at him and again saw a vision of the skin flaps around his head that previously made him seem like a dog. She could see them more clearly now, and realized they were phantom wounds, the results of the self-inflicted rifle blast that had ended his killing spree.

Strong and confident, Dennison stepped up to Jobe and put her arms on his broad shoulders. Slowly, Shutty thought sensually, she squeezed and pulled him up to a standing position.

“The second one is always easier. You were lucky to see what it was like for Bilka,” Dennison said.

Jobe nodded and wiped away tears.

Dennison tilted her head and looked up sideways into his brown eyes. "Jobe, is there anything you want to say? Anything left you want to do? Anything you need to understand?"

He just shook his head.

"Good," Dennison said. "Then go."

This time, rather than the ubiquitous pink glow, an electric blue luminosity—*Blue for boys?* Shuttty wondered—scratched itself along the room's naked brick wall in a vaguely lightning-shaped pattern. The shape widened, pulling itself apart, revealing behind it a brightly lit tunnel trailing off into forever, the proverbial light throbbing at its unseen end.

Jobe, needing no further encouragement, stepped in. The severe wounds his form had taken from the unfriendly faded. With them went his world-weary exhaustion, which was replaced by a huge, shit-eating grin. A happier face she'd not seen on him, even when he was laughing at his own bad jokes. As he walked off, he said something. Shuttty swore it was along the lines of, "Oh, wow! What hot babes!" but by the time the sentence was complete, his silhouette had been absorbed into the great calming blue.

Then it and he, like Bilka, were gone.

"Was all that gaudy crap for real?" Shuttty said in a half-whisper. It was intended for herself. She didn't realize how closely Dennison was standing.

"As much as anything," Dennison said. "The things that tethered them here—their feelings that they *should* be here—became nonissues when they realized they were dead, and found out that their killer died too. So they were free to go. Where? I haven't got a clue. As far as Orpheus can tell, what comes next looks like whatever you want it to be."

"You mean it could be, like, all Elvis Presley impersonators?" Shuttty asked, a little worried at the shapes some heavens might take.

"So they tell me," Dennison said, nodding. "So what about you?"

It took half a second before the question really registered. Bilka and Jobe were gone, and Kleck was apparently part of the Orpheus gang. So now it was her turn.

Shutty shook her head, sending the thick long lines of her black hair this way and that. She backed a few steps away from Dennison, fearing the woman's touch might be what brought on transcendence. "Me? Do the tunnel-of-light thing? I don't think so."

"It won't be like that for you. It'll be whatever you want it to be," Dennison said, stepping forward. Shutty's hands shot up threateningly. Dennison stopped short, as though she'd hit a physical barrier, but her face betrayed no surprise.

"Hold on. Hold on," Shutty said. "Stop with the spiritual reassurance crap and answer some questions. You're from Orpheus, right? Orpheus works for money. Who hired you? What did they hire you to do?"

Kleck reared. "There's no need to tell her that," he said, rubbing his face.

"Oh, I think there is, dog-boy," Shutty said. "And let's try to remember, if I used a phantom gun on the Big Ugly, I can certainly use one on you, psycho-schmuck."

"You stupid little bitch..." Kleck said. He headed for her, that look in his eyes again. Dennison quickly raised her own hand to block him. Clearly stronger now, she succeeded. Kleck was still angry, but he'd stopped advancing. The little tiger had hit the edge of his cage.

"Back off, Martin. Back. Off. Let me handle this. Try to remember how well we're doing so far, okay?" Dennison asked. She turned back to Shutty and spoke plainly. "We were hired by Adrian Kleck. Martin's father. After the... incident here, Kleck became an agent for Orpheus...."

"Stop," Shutty said. "How could Kleck become an Orpheus agent if he's been here doing the dance of death with us for the last month?"

"She said *you* were trapped," Kleck interrupted. "Not me. You sort of kept me here in your dreams, so to speak."

"Adrian Kleck paid for Martin's training. He also paid for this mission," Dennison said.

Shutty snickered. "Daddy still cleaning up after you, huh?"

"None of that, none of it, none of this," Dennison said, locking her eyes on Shutty, "has to have anything to do with you."

There was something odd about the way she'd said, "has to"—as though there were some sort of choice involved, as though it still *could* have something to do with Shutty, if she wanted.

But that wasn't a thought she could hold onto right now. Instead, a deep sadness took the spirit of the murdered young woman, and all the thinking, all the anger, all the effort simply paused. Death was, after all, all Shutty had ever wanted, and now she was told it could really be everything she'd expected. Pink light Christianity for Bilka, hot babes for Jobe. What flavor would she get? Something that was uniquely hers. So, maybe leaving was the only way to find out what it was she'd truly been looking for, a secret her dark heart had always kept so tightly concealed, even from herself.

Then she realized, for the first time, that things could actually glow black. Dennison had told the truth—it wasn't just about white and pink and all goody-two-shoes things. The room was throbbing with ebony, purple at the highlights, a splotch of color here and there—like gems, like her room, like her very own room. In fact, it felt like her inner sanctum was swelling and about to become the world.

A wicked half-grin took her mouth and she found herself saying, "Cool."

In the sparkles among the black, something sang to her, calling, pulling—not in a hungry way like the "unfriendly" had done with Tragic Alex and Jobe, but in a warm and silvery way as if she were about to be lifted into her mother's lap, at last a babe again, all worries vanished, all pains eased. Her tired heart was just about to dissolve into it when a nagging earthy

thought, a horrible patchwork of words and not-yet-lost neuroses lunged from mind to soul and took a stranglehold. She stopped dead and turned to Kleck and Dennison, fuming.

"Wait a minute," she said, jabbing a black-painted fingernail toward Kleck. "What happens to *him*? Where does *he* go?"

Dennison half raised a hand toward Kleck, and said, "Don't..." but it was already too late. The lips that formed the smug expression that only he in all the universe could manage had already started speaking: "If the unfriendlies don't get me? Then, once my victims are all clear, I'm out of here."

Shutty rattled her head. The dark light began to fade.

"Martin, shut up," Dennison pleaded.

"No. Wait," Shutty said. "Even someone, even *something* like you gets to go to the afterlife?"

"So I'm told." Martin grinned.

She clomped up to him, not bothering to adjust her socks and nearly stabbed him with her pointy elfin nose.

"You burst my pretty eyes, splattered my blood all over my pretty hair—and you can still achieve eternal bliss?"

Dennison rolled her eyes and muttered to herself.

"You said, yourself, the world's unfair," he answered.

"That was when I thought I'd *seen* all of it," Shutty shrieked.

With a roar of faux wood against cheap floor tile, one of the remaining furnishings, a bookshelf, shook, tipped and crashed to the floor. A hanger whipped from the closet across the stale air to the opposite side of the room where it slammed into the brick with a wiry twang.

"You asshole!" Dennison screamed. "My God! Didn't you pay *any* attention to the training? She's manifesting poltergeist abilities! And in this place any additional activity could bring unfriendlies from miles around!"

"Maybe I did and maybe I don't care. Maybe I don't care about this mission, the court case or any of that. Maybe this little Goth shithead who wouldn't give me

the time of day just pissed me off more than the others, and I don't want to let her go just yet! Maybe I just want to see her bleed some more, and maybe I don't really give a shit what you or Orpheus or my father want!"

Kleck, eyes burning, pounded his chest with his fist: "I'm free now and nobody, *nobody* can fucking touch me ever again!"

Of course, it was then that an overwhelming visible stench poured from the solid wall behind him. It gushed out in swirls of mottled fumes colored a cheesy orange and white. As the swirls curled about him like living things, Kleck's grimace shifted to revulsion. He looked as though he might throw up. He stepped forward to get away, but on the wall between the swirls a pulpy blackness flopped out, attaching itself to his back, holding him fast.

Then the faces appeared.

At first Shuttty thought it was one big thing, maybe with two heads, but in fact, it was two. The larger, rat-like thing was nudging at Kleck's feet, nipping at his ankles, drawing back chunks of the gauzy white stuff he seemed to be made of. In its way, it reminded her of Tragic Alex.

They were shredding him, pulling him into the wall. Kleck fell forward and dug his ectoplasmic hands into the floor trying to yank himself free, but for every inch he gained, he lost two.

Shuttty and Dennison stared at him for a second.

Then they looked at each other.

"What court case?" Shuttty asked.

As if oblivious to the fact he was being slowly destroyed, Kleck barked an order at Dennison: "No! Keep your fucking mouth shut! I own you!"

Dennison's head shifted slightly as if she were going to obey, but in the end she ignored him. "Adrian Kleck is facing lawsuits from your parents. There's evidence he abused Martin for years: drugged him, beat him, then disregarded the increasing symptoms of his psychosis. Investigators even found a little pet cemetery

on the Kleck estate, where the remains showed evidence of torture.”

“I own you! I own you!” Kleck screamed louder, as if he somehow weren’t being heard. His legs were gone up to the knees now.

“Your parents wanted to contact you for obvious reasons, to see if your souls were at peace, but also to try to find out exactly what happened. The information wouldn’t have been admissible in the civil suit, but it might have led to the right sorts of questions. Kleck wanted to head that off by clearing your spirits.”

It made sense. Mom always had bought into that late-night TV crap. But Orpheus was still working with the Klecks. Shuttty’s eyes narrowed.

Dennison shook her head. “Listen carefully. I’m not saying Orpheus is always on the right side of ethics or the law, but in this instance, during my briefing when the possibility of, well, *losing* Martin Kleck came up, I got the definite impression no one would miss him. Do you hear me, Shuttty? Do you understand what I’m saying? A wink is as good as a nod. *No one will miss him.*”

As if to make the point, Dennison walked up to the door, the symbol of their post-life prison, and pressed her hand down hard on the bent silver handle. It clicked. The door was actually ajar. Shuttty shook as if a cool breeze were blowing right through her. The thought of leaving the way she came in was so dizzying, she nearly forgot about the creatures devouring Kleck.

“In fact, if he were the only thing keeping me here, I’d be gone,” Dennison said. “The only issue remaining is you. What do you want, Shuttty?”

“Me? It’s not like I’ve got a lot of choices,” she said.

“Maybe more than you think. You’re different than the others. You’d been near death three or four times. I know, I’ve done it myself, not through suicide, but through shamanic rituals that nearly left me just as dead. But you came back, you had the will, and you’re here now, not sure you want to go. Your parents showed us your journals. I read the entries about the shadow shapes you saw: the lights, the tunnels, the dead relatives. Typical

near-death experiences, one of the marks Orpheus looks for in their agents. And everything I've seen here makes me think you'd be a good candidate. Orpheus is looking for ghosts to join its ranks. Spirits have abilities. You can be trained in your new form. You can grow, learn more. It's up to you. And you knew. Part of you knew all along."

Remembering them, Shuttty rolled up her tuxedo sleeves to stare at her old scars. Long and ragged from her wrist to the middle of her forearm, they were seething now, worms crawling in and out of worms. She regarded the sight curiously. If it had been an effect in a movie, she might have thought it was pretty cool.

"You mean I knew *this* about the world all along?"

"In a way," Dennison said.

Kleck screeched.

Shuttty bristled. "This is ridiculous. What are you, a fucking recruiter? I'm dead! Dead! Not on my way to ROTC. And you... you don't even know what that thing was that ate Alex, or where he went now, do you?"

"Yeah. That's all true," Dennison said.

The screaming shrank to a low moaning. Beneath that were the sounds of Kleck's hands scratching against the tile. Beneath that, the sound of steady chewing. Shuttty was weighing, wavering, looking down, looking back, hungering for whatever was on the other side of that door.

"How long can I stay a ghost?" she asked, though the answer didn't really matter.

"I've never met one more than a few years old, myself. The theory is that eventually you just, well... fade," Dennison said.

Clawing at the floor, twitching from the waste up, his precious phantom genitalia long ago eaten away, Kleck muttered, "Help me. Help me."

But Kate was at the open door, holding her eye contact with Shuttty.

"I'm not going any place *he* can go," Shuttty said.

Dennison nodded. "If we let those things eat him, and I honestly don't know *what* they're doing to him, I'll need

two things—your silence and your promise to stay and help with the rest.”

“The rest? The rest of what?”

“Like I said, I’ve got a team out in the hall. We felt it best that only Kleck and I enter the room. But I don’t know why they haven’t answered my signal, so there’s more going on here than we bargained for. You could be an Orpheus agent. Or not. Whatever. But please, just give me a reason. Just give me a fucking reason and I’ll let him go,” Dennison said.

“Fucking bitch!” Kleck howled, doggish predator eyes wildly reeling.

“Shut up, asshole,” Dennison said, not bothering to look in his direction.

“Why?” Shuttly asked.

“It would be a waste to let him carry on, just like it would be a waste to let you fade,” Dennison said. “Whatever other rules this world is made of, the only one I trust is that waste sucks.”

“I’ll kill you! Blast you both to hell! Splatter your fucking bitch brains against the walls!” Kleck pulled, yanked, and tried to tear at his own shrinking ectoplasmic body, to sunder enough of it free from the inky grasp to survive.

Dennison looked deeply into Shuttly and said, “Well?”

Letting loose her imagined sympathy, which even now she feared was but a pretense of the flesh, Shuttly solemnly intoned, “Okay. Cross my heart and hope he dies.”

Dennison did not react with emotion. She simply yanked Shuttly’s spirit into the hall. The move was so quick, the girl feared a part of herself had come loose and been left behind. It had. The tether that tied her was gone. She was somewhere else now. Someplace exactly the same, only different.

Strong arms pulled the door shut, but Shuttly still heard Kleck’s screams, each and every one, as though he were sleeping right beside her in the dark, caught in nothing more than a nightmare. Beyond that, an insistent mosquito buzz drummed at the back of her hearing, over and over, in squeaky near-silent sounds that seemed

to her a poor scratchy imitation of speech. It was at least a few minutes before she realized that the sound was actually Kate calling her name, drawing her attention to the hallway where they now stood.

There were others standing about, staring at her. All seemed to be nursing wounds. Up and down the quiet hall, evenly spaced, were a set of identical gray doors, all like slabs save for their shining silver handles. It was odd. there were no posters hanging, no event announcements, no splashes of student art with their mostly unending sameness, but occasional glimpses of greatness. The hall had been abandoned.

Of course, Shutter thought. Who would want to live on the same hall where four students were killed?

But there was more. Shapes were gathering. Black translucent leeches clung near each of the dormitory doors, disturbing their square prison-like sameness with shapeless blobs of shadow. Shutter had always thought the brick halls looked like a morgue. She'd usually chalked it up to her own morbid disposition. Now, she wasn't so sure.

The reason dawned on her, but Dennison gave it words: "Yeah, you're right. Kleck didn't just kill the four of you in the room. He killed everyone he could in the dorm. It's going to be a long night."

The news was not comforting. Since learning she was dead, Shutter had felt a unique hunger for life—at least to be near it. Feeling the bunching of cloth beneath her heel, she bent over to hike up her fallen sock. There was no sock she realized for a second, no body, no hands, no discomfort, but here it still was: in her mind, in her fingers, in her shoes, in the marks her hand had made on the window—again and again and again. With a wince, she realized she might well be adjusting her loose socks for all eternity.

Dennison and the others pulled her slowly along, hurriedly whispering odd factoids about Orpheus and the spirits. Shutter steadied herself and made ready to do battle with the night, within and without, though just where the line between the two could be drawn, if it could, she could no longer say.

No wonder the world was haunted.

EURYDICE

SETH LINDBERG

The memory Anders liked best was of lying in a park with Lila, an arm wrapped around her as she rested her head on his chest, watching the sun slowly set.

"So, do you like working for the Orpheus Group?" she asked him, softly.

Anders grinned. "I do now."

Lila's laugh was soft and low, like the sound of a bird taking flight. "I like it, too. I've always liked it. Not to say I don't like it more, now." She turned her head to glance up at him. The sun turned a darker red as it widened against the horizon.

Anders sighed and spread his hand over her shoulder blade, trying to commit the feeling of her musculature to memory. "I do wonder where they got the name."

"What, Orpheus Group?"

"Yep." Her shoulder felt taut in his hand. Her body pressed up close against his. It felt right. Life had never felt more right, as far as he could remember.

"It's from a myth, dumbass."

"Oh yeah? Like with Zeus and stuff?"

"Yeah. It's romantic. Orpheus is this poet, right? And his wife, Eurydice, is running in the field only a few days after they marry, and gets bit by a snake and dies." She turned her head away from him, watching the sun. It had seemed to take forever to get to this one point, but now that it hit the horizon, it sank rather quickly down. "Poor Orpheus is shattered, but he's the son of a god—"

"Which one?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Anyways, so he travels to the underworld—"

"Ah, I can see why."

She hit him lightly in the chest. "Stop interrupting me." He gave her an apologetic look, then she continued. "So Orpheus travels to the underworld and meets Hades and Persephone. Hades is—"

"I know who Hades is," he said, sounding more defensive than he meant to. "The god of the underworld, right? And Persephone's the chick he stole."

Lila turned to look up at him, a lopsided smile on her face. "Something like that." Behind her the sun had already set, but sunlight still reflected off the clouds in a display of reds and oranges. "So he goes to the king and queen of the underworld to plead with them to let him take Eurydice back, and being a poet, composes a song as beautiful as any in existence. All the ghosts stop what they're doing, they're so haunted by his song. Even the angry Furies begin to cry. Hades, being male, is unmoved, but Persephone weeps and pleads with her husband." She peered at him. "What's that look for?"

"What look?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Well, so it's unmanly to cry?"

"Pretty much. I don't know why, but I don't pretend to understand the ways of you Neanderthal men." Her grin turned ironic. "But you're above all that, anyways." She planted a kiss on his chest.

"Oh, I see." He felt slightly mollified by that.

"So Persephone convinces her husband to let Orpheus bring Eurydice back. Hades finally gives in, but on one condition—while he leads her out, he can't look back. If he looks back, she's gone from him forever. He agrees and he leads Eurydice to the world of the living. But just as he reaches the top, he hears her stumble and instinctually turns back, and—"

"And she's gone from him, forever."

"Exactly," she told him soberly.

The oranges in the clouds had turned into reds, and the reds into purples. It was a vivid, beautiful sunset.

"So what happens after that?"

"Hmm?"

"What happens to him after he gets back?"

"Well..." Lila paused for a second, thoughtfully. "He wouldn't be with another woman again. This, of

course, drove girls nuts about him, and they chased him everywhere. We're suckers for the romantic types."

"I see, I see," said Anders. "I should be taking notes."

"You should! At any rate, finally these girls who worship Dionysus start chasing after him, and these girls won't take no for an answer. When he won't submit to their advances, they drive themselves into such a frenzy that they rip him to pieces."

"Wow."

"Yeah," she said, looking back up at him. She had these very light freckles, right under her eyes. It wasn't the kind of thing Anders had noticed right off the bat, but once he had, it became the most adorable thing in the world to him.

"His head and his lyre float down the river, still playing music. The Muses gather up his body parts and burn them, and Zeus puts his lyre up in the stars for all to remember him."

"And that's it?"

"Not quite." Lila's eyes twinkled. "Once he went back to the realm of the dead, he found Eurydice, and the two of them stuck together from then on. It's said he never takes his eyes off of her, now that he can look at her without anything going wrong. It's sweet, I think."

Anders leaned back and looked at the stars, now starting to come out. He took a deep breath, feeling heady, full of hope, a wave of passion and desire and serenity all mixing around inside him like some kind of alchemy. "Yeah," he replied dumbly, thinking of her. "It is."

"Not half as sweet as you are, though," she told him, her tone flattering. "I'm afraid to kiss you, thinking my teeth might rot right out."

"They might, huh?" He shifted his weight, turning to move his head closer to hers. "I say we test out that little theory."

She laughed from the back of her throat, sounding pleased. His lips grew closer to hers, brushed against them.

When his memory turned to imagination, they never stopped kissing. It was better that way.

Anders opened his eyes, then immediately wished he hadn't. He had only dreamed of Lila. A re-enactment of a memory, that was all. His vision blurred and it was like every part of him ached, like every cell in his body complaining bitterly about its state in the world. He felt disoriented and tired, worn, shattered, his brain somehow dry. It was like that every time. Indeed, it seemed with each successive trip his body felt more taxed, and the recovery took longer.

He turned his body over on one side, a feat requiring an extreme effort, like overturning a beached whale, slowly rolling it back toward the salty arms of the ocean. He expected to find Lila there, her back turned toward him, shoulder lightly rising and falling, the fading tattoo of Celtic knotwork spread between her shoulder blades. But that side of the bed was empty.

Unconsciously, as if seeing if it was still there, he ran a thumb along the thick scar that ran up his forearm from his elbow to his wrist.

Blast, he thought bitterly. *They've rescheduled our times off, yet again.* Once more he came back from one of his extended missions with the Group to find that Lila's schedule had been slightly changed, that she'd be working for a few extra days or longer, and that he'd spend his two weeks of recuperation without being able to touch her olive skin, feel her next to him, or look into her warm brown eyes.

He tried to rise up from the bed, maybe stumble into the bathroom, but it was too much effort. His body hurt all over. It felt uncomfortable, like he was trying on someone else's corpse just to see what it was like and

had found out far too late that the whole thing didn't agree with him.

It was those first two days back that made him realize all the hidden costs of the job. His coworkers mostly loved the work. It was dangerous stuff, always unique, no desk jobs in his department. You were doing different things with every mission: sorting and finding out things, investigating, discovering stuff no one had a chance to. It was the cutting edge, worth the risks. Worth the pain.

Until you had to face it. Until you had to wake up and somehow make your body work again.

The last mission had been particularly hard. He barely remembered the details, and perhaps it was best that way. He really wasn't supposed to talk about any of it, and a lot of it disturbed him. He sat up and rubbed his face. Alone. Still alone.

He got up, took a shower. It felt a lot like scrubbing dead meat, like trying to wash off metaphorical blood and grime. He felt like another shank of beef in a slaughterhouse. He'd felt like this a lot since joining Orpheus. Days like today, he wondered why the hell he bothered. Then he got rested up, they put him under again, and he knew. He just knew. It wasn't like the false promise of drugs, what Orpheus gave you. It was the sense of purpose, determination. Like the adrenaline thrill of walking a tightrope without a net. But none of that helped the recovery.

Shower over, a T-shirt and whatever other clothing was around, and he was out the door, in his car, remembering how to drive. His little ritual for those downtimes, which office jargon so cleverly called being "on the beach," was to hit one of those chain restaurants—the ones that advertise to families and church-goers but always seemed to be open late, filled with impoverished students and chain-smoking club kids, ordering yet another refill of coffee. Grab some-

thing with sausage, grease, eggs, and preferably some toast. Chow down before it all congeals.

But this time he felt different, he didn't know if he could manage the effort required for even the minimal amount of politeness you needed in one of those places. Best to hit a convenience store, keep his head low, grab a six-pack and some of those disgusting make-your-own nachos. Man, what a guilty pleasure. Yeah, that's what he'd do.

The place was mostly empty. He spent far too long shuffling between the small aisles, grabbing the beer, making a what-the-hell buy of some kind of cheesy crackers, finally hitting the nacho and hot dog area. He stared at the hot dogs. They looked so tasty, so forbidden. They'd obviously spent more than the allotted time slowly rolling under heat lamps. Processed meat baked, frozen and baked again until blistered.

The woman behind the counter read some tabloid and chewed gum. Loudly. A television was set to some glitzy celebrity profile show, revealing some rock star's expensive and overindulgent house. Some older woman prowled the tiny aisles in some set pattern. A guy with a white hat pulled backwards stood by the beer fridge and peered at it like all of life's mysteries were somehow arranged inside.

The television flickered. The guy in the hat looked up, then stared back at the beer fridge. Anders rather hesitantly began to siphon out nacho cheese-food from a pump at the condiments bar.

The television flickered again, and Anders heard a voice from the television set say something like "...ovize." He looked up at the set, blinking. The static faded to show a wall of gold records on the show, then with a flicker the image disappeared again. Behind the counter, the woman sighed and got off the chair with some difficulty, grabbing a broom. She walked over and looked up, then began to tap the set roughly on its side.

The old lady continued to prowl. The beer-starer glanced over once, then figured it wasn't his business. Now the television showed nothing but static. Anders peered at it. He could almost see a man's head, too blurred to really recognize. He put down the nachos and walked over, looking up. He could just make out words, fading in and out.

"This is Radio Free Death," began the voice from the television set. Anders' attention was fixed. *Oh shit*, he thought. *I've heard of this guy*. It was something of a local legend. Some monkey-wrencher out there, someone in the know. Rumor had it the guy was an ex-employee of Orpheus, someone with access to the board of directors' correspondence. He knew things. The whole thing was mysterious and slightly unbelievable, like those stories about the house down the road and how it's supposed to be haunted. Unbelievable, that is, until you joined the organization.

The convenience store cashier spat. "Damned cable. Can't believe they rape us for such bad service." She hit it again, and the faded, static-covered image flickered. She didn't seem to have heard the voice at all. *Why was that?* It didn't make sense.

Anders gulped, and reached a hand out. He had a mad idea to rip the broom away from her, but stopped himself.

The image faded back in. "A spectre is haunting Orpheus." The voice seemed clear but distant. Anders sensed an intensity behind it, almost a religious fervor. The woman hit the set and it faded out, briefly showing some celebrity's cheerful face before fading back again. "...find what brings it to you." Again, static overwhelmed the message. "...who wants you to find it, the..." Burst of static. "Ovize." Again, that word. Ovize? Advise, maybe? It didn't seem to make sense. Anders shook his head.

The static faded, the show came back. Life as normal, once again. The woman behind the counter

looked strangely triumphant, like this was all her doing. She marched back to her station as if she had personally solved the world's problems.

Anders shook his head, went back to his nachos. He got an extra helping of cheese, paid, and fled the store.

A spectre is haunting Orpheus.

The words kept on slipping into his thoughts on the drive home. He knew this was the kind of incident he should really report to someone in the corporation, but he felt a little bitter about the place now: tired, annoyed, a little frustrated. The honeymoon was over. This was his vacation, a time to forget about all the weirdness, the stupid office politics, the fucked up assignments, and to just live life.

But it didn't feel much like life without Lila around. That was the rub. And it's not like the various managers, directors, and project leaders hadn't been aware of their relationship—but despite their similarities, he and Lila were different enough that the powers-that-be kept them on different teams. They always arranged to have their vacation times coincide, but missions always ran late, directors always pushed for more time on pet projects, and debriefings and those stupid ILPs—Incident Learning Processes—always got in the way. Apologies could be, and were, made later.

Nothing was ever anyone's fault. So fuck them. Let them find out about this from somewhere else. The Group always seemed to catch wind of these things anyways.

He made it home, toyed with his nachos for a while and drank ridiculous amounts of some kind of new sweetened, caffeinated soda. He picked up a book, *A History of Secret Societies*, by Arkon Daraul, that Agent Dennison had recommended to him in one of her crabby rants about his need to expand his own knowledge of “the unknown.” This, for the guy who flunked those mandatory Kundalini yoga classes. He paged

through a bit of it but it all seemed so oddly paranoid. And, again, this was more work stuff. He tossed the book into a corner and looked for something more productive to do, more fun.

Five minutes later, he started dialing the number for his project leader. He stopped himself, hung up. Dialed again, this time one of his old friends in Engineering.

The phone picked up on the fifth ring. "Frick speaking." He sounded brisk. Professional.

"Hey. It's Anders."

Frick's voice relaxed. "Yo, dude, whassup? You on the beach?" Anders could imagine Frick sliding his rather large ass forward in the chair as he slouched back.

"Yeah, I am. Listen—"

Frick cut him off. "How's Lila doing? And what's a fine chick like her doing with some loser like you?"

Anders sighed. "Thanks for the vote of encouragement." It was hard not to sound bitter, even though he knew Frick was joking.

"Jeez, Andy. Lighten up. You just don't seem the type for a girl like her. That's all I'm saying."

"What the hell do you know about women, anyways?" He sounded a little more annoyed and angry than he wanted to. He didn't like to sound spiteful like this. Or this defensive.

Frick laughed, though, which caught him off guard. "True, I don't know dick about hot bitches like that. So, why'd you call?"

Anders told him about the incident in the mini-mart. Frick listened with interest, then sighed. "Radio Free Death, man. I've only heard about that. Creepy stuff. Never experienced it myself."

"Yeah," said Anders. "It got to me. Especially that bit about a spectre haunting Orpheus."

"The irony does not escape me, let me tell you," said Frick.

"You think there's anything to it?"

"I know there's something to it, dude."

"Oh yeah?"

"Definitely." Frick sounded firm. "Layoffs."

"Layoffs? No way, not Orpheus."

"Believe it, dude. Word around the water cooler is, some of the kids down in Accounting are none too happy about the cost overruns some of you agents are piling up. They're looking over all the books, and the board's furious about something. They might even call some consultants. It's like a pall over every department." Frick's voice sounded ominous, almost Vincent Price in his delivery. A ghost, well, the Orpheus Group could handle a ghost or two. It was, after all, their business. But layoffs, that was another thing entirely.

"Christ. Layoffs. That's a frightening thought."

"You said it, dude. You know, you should think about going back to Engineering. Screw all this field stuff. We're doing a lot of interesting things, some pretty secret stuff, handling new tech. It's really exciting."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Anders thought back to when he was "discovered" by the field operative team. There had always been an uneasy, jealous tone to Frick's voice after that. Everyone in the company knew who the hotshots were, and it certainly wasn't the engineers.

"Can't tell you," Frick replied, smugly. The tone was just insincere enough for Anders to doubt if Frick told him that it'd actually be that interesting at all.

Anders had started in Engineering. It was only later when someone in Investigative Consulting looked over his medical records more carefully that he went through the tests to become a field agent. Before that it had just seemed like a neat new job to him, a chance to test out some interesting gear. He'd fallen into the tech sector mostly by accident: he had the kind of personality to spend ages up late at night fixing some vital problem, then slack off for the next week. Tech groups like Orpheus' Engineering section tended to be

split evenly between the smug nine-to-fivers with their useless degrees and certifications and the intense loners like Anders who lived to work until four in the morning when the random mood or crisis hit them.

But the Orpheus Group took care of its employees. It had to. Orpheus worked with some pretty odd tech and kept a lot of secrets. The kind of people willing to work with the dead, or ahem, *Post-Life Entities*, as the pamphlets liked to call them, were not all that common.

To be on the front lines, to go in the field, you needed to have an even rarer skill set. A malignant tumor that doesn't go away, a lifetime spent as a war correspondent, one too many near-fatal car crashes. It could be anything, but it all led up to one factor: brushes with death. The more the better.

For Lila, it had been her heart. A congenital defect had her on the operating table by the time she was five. Dead for four minutes, or so the reports said. In and out of hospitals all her childhood, by her teenage years she wore it like an angry shroud. She beat her old record and was clinically dead for six full minutes in 1999, something that prompted her family to up and move to the States, where they hoped they might get better care. For Lila, the move allowed her to find a new outlet for the passion for life that filled her both with joy and rage. She brought it all out full force while fronting a three-piece punk group, stalking about the stage in an angry snarl, spitting, screaming out her lyrics of love and confusion and sex and fear.

With Anders, it was different. Anders had confronted death, wished for it. He'd tried to commit suicide enough times to stop counting, each time insufferably failing. Too many times, he sat there crying, terrified of doing it and feeling like an utter failure for contemplating it, yet feeling like even more of a failure, a coward, for not being able to go through with it. But sometimes he'd do better than others. End

up in a hospital. He was committed once, but they let him out on his own recognizance.

He'd pick up the pieces again, and things would be okay for a while, before it all came crashing down one more time. That frustration would rise up like some kind of reptilian beast from a Fifties atomic horror movie and prowl about his psyche. The disgust, the hatred. It would take one tiny reminder to make him realize how ugly the world was. It could be a casual betrayal by a friend, or the slow, manipulative psychosis of someone he knew and tried to understand. And then something would snap.

In a morbid kind of way, it amused him how bad he was at suicide. Not that he wasn't earnest, but while his mind had strayed into darkness, his body remained firm in its conviction to live.

Years of therapy and serious courses of drugs had "cured" him of all but the occasional impulse. Even then, that self-destructive urge didn't go away completely. It was always resting at the back of his mind, a whisper in his ear to quickly turn the steering wheel to veer into oncoming traffic. *Go ahead*, it told him. *Do it. Hurry.* He'd become a master at dealing with therapists, telling them what they wanted to hear. There was a pattern, and you could get around it if the therapist wasn't bright. Often enough, they weren't.

He listened with interest when they told him the latest theories about suicidal people. Certain studies were showing that suicidal behavior had neurological origins, based on an area of the brain that regulated impulse control. Suicidal people were more likely to make snap decisions, and thus more likely to suffer the consequences of them. He could read the subtext of the statement in their flat expression and fragile smiles. *It's not your fault you're broken.*

His life had moved from the dizzying highs and lows to a more sedentary, bland existence. And he was happy with that, satisfied. He wanted nothing more.

Until he met Lila.

He first saw her in training, once he switched departments. There'd been that sense of attraction right off the bat, but he knew she was way out of his league. Maybe he had gotten some idea she was already in a relationship, or something like that. Either way he brushed off any thoughts of anything happening between the two of them, and therefore just acted like himself around her, bitter and wry about their assignments and the rather odd classes they were taking.

Training as an agent was tougher and more frustrating than he had expected. Five years before, he would have given up and stalked off in fury and self-hate, but age and hardship had given him a sense of newfound patience. He flunked the Kundalini yoga classes, didn't understand the random drugs that left everyone dazed and befuddled, and was frankly bored with the time in the isolation tanks. It all seemed to point to something, but he couldn't figure out exactly what it was.

The more Anders flailed at it, the more Lila dove right in. And again, Anders found that quality of hers strangely alluring. Or perhaps not so strangely, after all.

And so it seemed somehow telling that the day Anders and Lila ended up together was the same day Anders washed out of training and Lila finally had her breakthrough. She joined the ranks of the versatile and unique agents whom Orpheus termed skimmers, those who could separate spirit from flesh through training and acts of will. She dove headlong into her job.

For Anders, the sleeper tanks awaited. And more forms to be signed in triplicate, waiving his life away, or any right to sue should some accident happen while he was under. Lacking the ability to do it himself, he'd be sent into a near-death coma with the help of special equipment. Being a sleeper meant tours that lasted six weeks and up, and a more shattering and less natural detachment than Lila's, but it still got Anders what he hungered for. It gave him a place. It gave him a purpose.

"So, do you ever think of it anymore?" Lila had asked him late one night, right as they both were falling asleep.

"Think of what?" he had replied sleepily.

"You know, suicide."

Anders peered up at the ceiling. "Yes, but... not really."

"Not really?"

"No, it's not a driving thing anymore." He said this slowly.

Lila turned, leaning on an elbow and inspecting him dubiously. "Why do you think that is?"

Anders frowned. He thought for a while. "I really don't know." But he did, he just couldn't quite bring himself to say it. *It's because I've finally found out why I'm here.*

The ringing phone brought him out of his reverie. He struggled to grab the phone before it went to voice mail.

"Hello?"

"Um, hi. Anders?" It was one of the project leaders. What was her name? O'Farrell. Her voice had a strange timbre to it. Anders had always been good at reading tones in voices, slight inflections. With something as strange as emotions, you could often be slightly off in your interpretation, so it was definitely more an art than a science. Still, his intuition brought the hackles up on the back of his neck.

"This is he."

"So, ah, how is your allotted required recuperation time going?" She sounded distracted.

Anders thought of that blurry image on the television, back in the mini-mart. A spectre haunting Orpheus. "I can't really complain."

"Good." Pause. "Ah, well, what I mean is..." Another pause. Her voice grew strained now. "Are you sitting down?"

"Yeah," he said. He wasn't.

"I have some terrible news, Anders. Your friend Lila is dead." Dead. The word was like a punch to the chest, knocking the wind out of him. He paused to collect his thoughts, thoughts which seemed to be wildly spinning around inside his head, no sentences left finished.

"She was on assignment," she continued. "I'm afraid I can't relate all the details, but she projected to aid a fellow agent and..." A rattling of papers. "Um, well, the agent is still in his ILP..." Anders winced sympathetically. He hated those debriefings. Incident Learning Process, nice corporate jargon for interrogation. "But our technicians arrived at the scene to find her body in a state of shock, her heartbeat irregular. On the way to the emergency treatment facility, they were, um, they were unable to revive her."

Anders stayed silent, listening to O'Farrell breathe for a second. "I see," he finally said, feeling as hollow and empty as the spaces between the stars.

"Oh, Anders, I'm so, so sorry." He could tell she honestly was, but it still came off saccharine.

"It's okay," Anders said. He took a deep breath, then rubbed his temples. "I have one question, though."

"What's that?"

"Has anyone talked to her yet?"

O'Farrell sounded confused. "Talked to her?"

"You know, now that she's dead."

O'Farrell's voice again got that defensive tone to it. "Um, well, I, um, I don't *think* so. I mean, it's still pretty early and all, and..." Her voice drifted off.

"Oh, come on," he said, sounding nearly as irritated as he felt. "There were projectors on the scene, and even if not, it's what we *do*. We talk to ghosts. Hell, we employ them. So where is she? I want to talk to her."

"I'm sorry, Anders, I..." Pause. "I'll get back to you, okay?" Her voice had a false cheerfulness to it.

Anders sighed. "Sure." *What an incompetent*, he thought.

"I'll get right back to you. Bye!" Click.

He slumped back down to the bed, then wrapped his arms around his knees. After a long sigh, he glanced over to Lila's side of the bed.

Well, no more sex, he thought, feeling gloomy.

He shook his head. What a selfish thought. Lila's probably freaking out wherever she is, what with being dead and all. Anders had some idea of what it was like to die just by his profession, but you couldn't go wrong thinking there might be something more once you were *actually* dead. He hoped she was okay. She was strong, though, he knew she'd pull out of it all. She was like that.

But, man. How would this change their relationship? Probably a lot, in different ways. Would she hang out in the house? She could probably stay employed with Orpheus if she wanted to. Her employment options now were frankly limited, if she even wanted to keep a job. But, what a huge change.

Death could really ruin a relationship. He'd seen it before. Like Agent Watson, dating one of the administrative assistants, what's-her-face, the blond one. She was with someone else two weeks after he died. He was devastated.

Anders shook his head. Tragic. He got up and lumbered into the kitchen to dig into the six-pack a little more. Popping open the top, he took a swig and tried to remember the advice of one of his therapists, long ago. Something about working things out by listing the possible good points of any major, unexpected change. See it in a better light.

Were there any good points to Lila being dead? He thought hard about it. *Well, he reasoned, since I spend the great majority of my life these days in those sleeper tanks, it's almost like I'm dead anyways. It's not like she won't be spending less time with me. Hell, she might even spend more time now.*

His mood brightened considerably, thinking along those lines.

The days went by quickly: talking to her relatives, making arrangements, speaking with various coworkers on the phone, signing up for mandatory grief counseling with that old hippie woman they hired that reminded him far too much of his weird high-school therapist, mostly because of the frizzy hair and those strange potato-sack sweaters she always wore.

The funeral seemed too soon, but then again, Watson's had as well. The Orpheus Group liked to bury its deceased agents quickly, it seemed.

The sky looked like it had empty threats of rain. Lila's funeral was a mixed bag: Various friends she'd collected over the years, including a few from across the Atlantic. An old band-mate and ex-boyfriend Anders had always been inexplicably jealous of. Her mother, a gray-haired Mediterranean woman with eyes far too large for her face. Partygoers and Orpheus personnel, the Orpheus Group kids all on one side and looking just a taste too casual about the whole affair.

Anders stood in his old, black wool suit that was a little too tight around the waist, stifling in the summer heat. He had to be the boyfriend in mourning and he felt anything but. He didn't feel like she was gone. She wasn't, actually, but there was so much he hadn't processed yet, he felt like he was in a daze. There was this pang of coldness that seemed to reside in his belly, this feeling of longing for her that wouldn't stand for being put to words. An awful, uneasy hesitation. No one had contacted her yet.

This was normal, he was told. Sometimes it took months to find them. Don't worry.

That tight knot of coldness within him grew, just a little.

He brushed off any company for the ride home before the wake. Looking forward to driving alone, pulling down those walls you keep up around company, he leaned his foot down on the accelerator and drove off, taking a winding route back. He stuck in a Cocteau Twins CD and turned it up, letting the elegiac voices carry over his depression. He could never figure out the lyrics to those songs. Were they even in English?

Halfway through the CD, he realized someone was talking. He gave a quick glance up at the rearview mirror and realized his back seat was occupied. That tension returned. He regretfully turned down the music.

"Don't get me wrong," the man continued with whatever it was he was talking about. "It's not that I mind the music. I just don't understand why people don't appreciate the old greats anymore. You know, the old Motown hits. Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, The Supremes, Gladys Knight, Little Stevie Wonder. They just don't make tunes like that anymore."

Anders got a better look at the man sitting in the back seat: late forties, a little fussy about his appearance, mouth set in a firm line, strong nose, strong chin. "Agent Hayes, right?" he asked.

The man looked up, pursing his lips slightly. "You can call me Tom. I wanted to offer my condolences to you. I worked with Lila; she was a good person."

Anders looked forward again, feeling himself frown. Tom's use of the past tense bothered him. "Thank you for saying that, Tom. Let's hope she makes her transition into the world of the afterlife easily." He'd used the same phrase to blow off several people in management. It had seemed to work fine. But Tom just shook his head slightly, squinting and looking out to one side.

"What?" Anders finally asked, flicking his eyes between the road ahead and Tom in the rearview. His annoyance was growing.

"I don't think it's that simple, Anders."

"What do you mean by that?" Anders narrowed his eyes as he drove.

"She's not the only one that's been taken recently," Tom said, flatly.

"Taken? What do you mean? There haven't been any funerals in a while, unless you mean Watson's...."

Tom shook his head. "No," he said absently. "Watson died months ago. The other two are sleepers, like you and me. Their bodies are in cryogenic suspension. They'll stay that way until the brass figures out what the hell to do with them."

Anders took a deep breath. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am."

"What happened to them?"

"Something got to them. A malignant ghost."

"The same ghost?"

"I think so. But what I don't understand is, why haven't they let people know about it. It seems strange to me; there's no reason for them not to be forthright about this. I mean, we're being cut down, one by one."

Haunting Orpheus. The words came filtering back. It sent a chill through him. "I...I heard about it, on the radio."

Tom Hayes looked up. "Radio?"

"Radio Free Death."

He blinked. "Really? What did they say?"

"Something's haunting Orpheus... and something about advice. It didn't come out clear."

Tom grimaced. "It rarely does. I'd love to know who's behind that little stunt, you know. It's got to be someone on the inside. I'd stake my life on it."

Like that really means anything these days, thought Anders. "So, what's this ghost? How do we get it? Does it have Lila?"

"I don't know. But I have a good idea who does."

"Oh yeah?"

"Ben Cotton. He was working with Lila when she..." Pause. "When it all happened. You know him?"

Anders grimaced. Ben. He slowed at the intersection as the light went yellow, threatening red. "Yeah, I used to worked with him. Not anymore."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Why is that?"

"He's reckless. And he's a thug. Our personalities just don't match."

Tom eased a sigh as the car came to a stop. "He's young. He's never had a family. All that posture, it will pass."

"You've got a lot of faith in people, Tom."

Tom darkened, just a bit. He tried to hide his frown. "Less than you know. But I have faith in you, and I want you to know I'll help you in any way I can."

He sounded earnest. Anders didn't understand. He barely knew the guy. "What's in it for you? Why do you care?"

Tom leaned forward, choosing his words carefully. "I... know what it's like to lose someone you care about. Especially in our position. There is no closure; there is so much hope. You always think she might come back. Every blip, every ghost, it could be her. And the hope eats you from the inside." He was looking out the window again, his expression pained. "I know that, all too well. That's why I want to help."

Anders glanced back up at the light, waiting for it to change. "I think I understand."

"Talk to Ben, find him. I'll see what I can find out, and get back to you."

"All right. But one more thing..." He glanced up at the rearview, then turned back in the seat. Tom Hayes was gone. He had spent too long materialized. It took effort. It was draining.

The light shifted from red to green. Anders drove off.

Finding Ben Cotton took some time. Anders left voicemails, email, tried to track down a cell phone number and failed. He finally asked around mutual

coworkers, one of whom said Ben spent a lot of time in the gym. Great. The Orpheus Group had it's own small gym and fitness center onsite. Anders had always meant to go, but it almost felt like, with all the time he spent in the vats, why bother? Agents fell into two categories: those who gave up on taking care of their bodies once they found out they could project as ghosts, and those who immediately redoubled their efforts at physical perfection.

He spent some time in the gym, talking to an overexcited personal trainer who did finally relate that, yes, Ben did spend time on the weights, often late at night. Anders only got the info after being talked into signing up for a fitness training session he had no intention of showing up for.

Two nights went by of popping in at random late hours, meanwhile spending more time settling effects and trying to save the things Lila really cherished: family photos, a few things from her high school years, that kind of thing. Anders worked a little, organizing the desk in the living room, looking over the papers and their collected finances. Three years ago the idea of buying a house—anything that permanent and stable—had seemed like a mad dream. With Lila, those big scary fears of the future melted away. He felt like he could have taken on anything if she was around. Life didn't seem so uncertain.

He hoped that would continue. He didn't really know. He had to find Lila. She was out there. He had to find her.

On the third night, Ben was in the back, working on weights. He kept repeating the curls over and over again, staring off at the barbell in his hand as if looking right through it. His face was set, and angry, disappointed. The T-shirt outlined his hardened physique, and his bared arms were covered with tiny scars and faded tattoos: blacks and blues against his dark skin.

Anders walked up, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Ben."

Ben looked up, then set his jaw. "Andy." Anders hated that name. How Ben found out, he never understood. Maybe he had some kind of schoolyard bully sixth sense. Who really knew? Ben turned and put the weight down heavily, then glanced back, folding his arms. He looked defiant.

But why defiant? Ben had nothing to prove to Anders. Whatever. On to the point. "I'm here to talk about Lila."

Just for a second, he saw Ben flinch. There was a look on his face, just for a moment. Fear. Fear and something else.

Ben stared down at the weights. His look grew hooded. "Yeah. Lila. She..." He looked away. "I'm sorry... she..." He swallowed. Words didn't come.

Anders shifted slightly. "It's all right." It wasn't. "I just want to know what happened."

Ben shook his head. "There's nothing much to say. Some ghosts, they're just fucking nuts. You know as well as me. They're just inhuman. Encountering those... it's just a risk you take in our business."

He's justifying it to himself, Anders suddenly realized. *He feels responsible somehow*. Anders tried to sound soothing, calm. "There might be more to it than you know. That... thing has gotten others."

Ben looked alarmed. "Who the fuck told you that?" "Tom Hayes."

"Hayes." Ben considered it, furrowing his brow. "What do you know about this?"

"A little. But first, tell me what happened."

Ben glanced over, then his shoulders slumped just slightly. "All right." He stopped, then glanced over, catching someone walking into the gym. "But not here."

"There's that faux-English pub a couple of blocks down, across from Jim's Bakery."

"Pheugh. Their food's awful."

"Yeah, but they have cider."

Ben sighed. "Cider. The wine cooler of the new millennium. Some day we'll make a real man out of you, Andy. All right, let's head over there."

Drinking with Ben Cotton reminded Anders of playing some reflex game with an older brother. He's bigger, faster, and unpredictable. You're going to get hurt. Anders bought the first round and got himself a cider, by the second round Ben was determined to take it but wouldn't pay for "one of those wussy apple drinks." They moved on to beer. Anders noted that Ben didn't leave a tip.

Ben drank from his second beer, then set the glass down, telling it: "It's like this. I was backup. I'm not used to working with skimmers like Lila. I've always been on operations in the tank with other sleepers like you and me. But they had a mixed team this time, us as backup and the others going in, talking to the homeowners in person. It was a simple fumigation: go in, deal with the bitchy ghost, get paid. A piece of cake, right?"

Anders nodded, sipping his beer. Bitter stuff. Not his style, but he'd drink it.

"The other sleeper, she's upstairs coaxing the ghost girl out of her little routine. Typical blip stuff, right? We're wondering what the hell's going on, someone like her couldn't be freaking out the house enough to call in professionals. The whole thing seemed kind of fishy.

Ben leaned forward. "That's when it gets a little muddy. I heard the babbling, this maddening noise, and I thought at first it was some effect of what the person upstairs was trying to do. The thing... It was human-shaped, but it didn't seem human, like... blurry, you know? Almost like a smudge. And it kept calling out, gibbering in one long, low, strangled scream. It

moved slow, then it'd blur and, and appear closer, louder, louder..." He stopped to take a drink. A big one. "It had no face, nothing at all, but there were these eyes all over it's body. Glowing pale light, darker where the irises should be."

Anders nodded, his stomach twisting a slow dance in his abdomen. "What happened then?"

"I... I attacked it, leapt on it. I went for it's fucking throat." He got a vicious look, like a cornered animal. "But it did no good. It's like it finally paid attention to me. It turned and... and screamed at me, and it hurt, it wrenched right through me. Suddenly I was throwing anything and everything I could at it. I don't know what it must have been like for the people who lived there, to see pictures fling from the walls, phones, candlesticks, anything. It's screaming now, it's hunting me down, and I think, 'This is it, Cotton,' And then..."

"And what?" Anders' eyes widened.

"She was there. Lila. As a ghost. She'd skimmed over and she was right there, but it was still going after me, until she started singing to it, this soft calming melody. It worked for me, the panic went right out of me, but for it, for it..." He bared his teeth, his eyes ablaze. "It turned on her. It's wail of anger seemed somehow... sad, now. And it got to her, and fast. Those eyes, they started opening up on her, like pus-filled sores. And I saw it. It was crying. Crying silvery tears."

"What happened then?"

"I... I ran. I kept telling myself I was weakened, if I had tried to get her away, it would have gotten both of us. But the truth is, I ran. I was... I was scared." His look showed disgust and anger. Sheer fury, directed inward.

"You did what you had to, Ben. Of course you were scared." He wanted to comfort him, but he didn't know how. His words didn't seem enough. "Everyone gets scared."

Ben looked up. "Not me," he said spitefully. "Not me."

Anders didn't have anything to say to that. He finished off his beer.

"So," Ben began hesitantly. "That... thing got others? Not just Lila?"

"Yeah. Hayes says two more. Sleepers. Management hasn't woken them up. No reason to, right now. Their bodies are just sitting there in the coolers. Maybe until management can figure out what they're going to do about this."

Ben clenched a fist. "Fucking bureaucracies. I'm sure they're having endless meetings about it. With action-fucking-items. It's bullshit."

"I don't know. Maybe they know something we don't."

Ben frowned. "Maybe. Or maybe no one's shown any leadership. Tomorrow morning, we'll go straight to that little number cruncher Negley, and see what he has to say."

Bradford Negley, before joining the Orpheus Group, had been a consultant for a major accounting firm, so it didn't come as a surprise investigators in the field called him a pencil pusher and worse. Still, he was the Senior Vice-President in charge of Investigative Consulting—i.e. field operations—and was said to have CEO Jack Tilton's ear. Not necessarily someone Anders felt like pissing off. "I don't know. Hayes made it seem like..."

"Fuck Hayes. The old man's gotten paranoid. I'll march in tomorrow morning, spill it all. You with me or not?"

Anders sighed. "Sure, sure. I'm with you."

Ben smiled, then rose. "I'm going to go back to my workout. Good talking to you. Be there tomorrow morning, all right?"

"Right." He watched Ben confidently stride off toward the exit. *Ah well*, thought Anders. *At least he looks a little less gloomy.*

The next day Anders managed to make it into the office, dressed a little nicer than normal, waiting around for Ben and unable to shake the feeling that this was some gigantic mistake. He wasn't good with authority figures anyways. They probably all had it in hand. No reason to confront anyone.

Maybe Ben had forgotten about it in the morning. Maybe he wouldn't show up.

Ben showed up. He gave Anders a smile that was far too confident, a "let me handle this" look, then led him to VP Negley's office. They waited far too long and then got sent in, waited again while the director took an important phone call on his cell phone.

Ben fidgeted. Played with the magazine on the seat, tore off the mailing label, then played with it. Drummed his hands on the armrest of the chair. Anders just sat there, feeling nervous.

Finally, Bradford Negley turned to them. He was white, appallingly white. Some people just scream their little ethnic stereotype. The head of Investigative Consulting did so in spades. It wasn't anything you could categorize. He just was.

Negley gave them the blandest smile in all of America. "How can I help you two?"

Ben leaned forward, all action. It seemed at that moment he was cut at all angles. "We're here to talk about the ghost that's been hunting down us field agents. We want to know what's going on about that."

Negley nodded. "You're talking about a particularly malignant Post-Life Entity? I don't think I've read anything in the most recent files."

Ben sighed. "If you've read the transcript of my latest ILP, it's all there. We know there's more."

Negley sighed. "I'm not quite up to speed on the latest incidents, regretfully. I need to get my secretary to review and summarize them. Are you sure this isn't something that can be handled by one of the assistant directors?"

"We wanted to go to where the buck stops," Ben said, confidently. "Because nothing's being done."

"I see," Negley replied. He turned to Anders. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite get your name."

"We met for the second time at Lila's funeral," replied Anders. He felt tired. "You offered your condolences about the tragic affair."

"Ah, yes," the executive said. "Truly tragic." He shook his head, then looked back at Ben. "Rest assured, the Orpheus Group cares about its field agents. I'm sure if there's a PLE that's a threat to our field operatives, it will be taken care of."

Ben frowned. "But it's not being taken care of. We have proof that it's not. This thing is hunting down field agents, one by one."

Negley raised one eyebrow, perfectly. "Proof?" he asked quietly.

"Well," Ben hedged. "We have a lot of good evidence that contributes to—"

Negley leaned forward. He remained polite, but his voice had an edge to it. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Should you find more information, please feel free to pass it along to me via my secretary. Good day, gentlemen." He turned to Anders. "Again, my condolences."

Anders nodded, and rose, feeling all of four years old. He glanced over at Ben, who looked flushed, but restrained. They said their goodbyes and left.

They walked down the hallway, away from the private offices. Ben was silent the whole time, one fist clenched. Suddenly he turned and slammed a fist against the wall, denting the plaster. "Fuck!"

Anders turned, blinking.

"Say it. You know you want to."

"Say what?"

"Say, 'I told you so.'"

Anders paused, briefly. On one hand, it was best not to provoke a violent man. But on the other hand..." I told you so."

Ben looked up, and grinned just a bit, though his eyes stayed angry. "So, what do we do now?"

"I don't know, talk to Tom Hayes? He's the one that had the information."

Ben shook his head. "We should find this thing, and we should get it. Put it out of commission."

"And how do we do that?"

Ben glanced off, in the direction of one of the office building's many cubicle mazes. "I don't really know."

Anders nodded. "So we find Hayes. He's still on assignment, though. His body's in the tanks, but who knows where his ghost is?"

Ben sighed, then nodded. "C'mon, this way."

Near the sleeper tanks there was a small lounge usually occupied by one or two off-duty field agents but, today, deserted. The TV was always on. You couldn't see an agent projecting as a ghost unless they wanted you to, but both Ben and Anders knew the place as a hangout for them. Ben strode in like he owned the place. "Yo," he called out. "Any you freaks home?"

No one answered.

"Hello? Anyone? Hello? We need to pass on some information."

Anders felt his mouth moving. "This is Craig," he heard himself say.

Ben turned to look at him. "Yo, Craig. We're looking for Tom."

"Which Tom?" It was his voice, his tongue. The whole thing was unnerving as hell.

"Tom Hayes," Ben said, looking at Anders as if he was the one talking.

"I haven't seen him around," Anders heard himself say. His mouth was about to go further when he clenched his jaw down, willed himself to stop speaking.

After a moment he said, through clenched teeth. "All right, this is too freaky. Show yourself."

In the corner of his eye, a body-shaped image formed. It looked like spider webs animated in human form, slightly silvery, just a bit translucent. The body was slightly taller than Anders, but not as tall as Ben.

"I don't like to do this; it's tiring," the body said quietly.

"Deal with it," Anders said bitterly. He massaged his jaw. It still felt weird.

Ben barked out a laugh. "If you see Tom Hayes, let us know. We're looking for him."

"What's this about?" the Craig-form said quietly.

Ben looked at Anders. Anders turned to him. "He's got some information about the death of one of our agents."

The silvery translucent figure didn't register much emotion, but the voice did. "Really? I'll make sure he finds you guys. Can I help?"

"I don't know. We'll let you know."

They left the information with him, then left, both agreeing to use whatever contacts and abilities they had to gather as much info as possible.

Later that afternoon, Anders dropped by Frick's cubicle. It was littered with various Dilbert cartoons with some political ones thrown in, and a few pictures of family, as if an afterthought. Frick was fat without being morbidly obese, pale in that fluorescent tan kind of way, with sandy blond hair and a bland, unassuming face. He grinned, seeing Anders walk up. "Yo! Homeslice. When you going shooting with me?"

Anders wrinkled his nose. "You know how I feel about guns."

Frick shrugged. "Shit's good to know about, man. In times like these it's good to have a little protection, a little... certainty." He patted the pocket of his jacket, like an older child touching an old teddy bear for good

luck. "Besides, it's fun. I like to picture the face of my new boss, Farquand, on the targets when I blaze away." He grinned, then changed the subject. "So. What brings you over to the Engineering section?"

"Nothing much," Anders replied. "Just wanted to see how my favorite geek was doing."

Frick sighed. "Eh, not good. Those morons in IT were supposed to give me a computer that worked, damn it all. I've spent the last two days trying to get it to recognize an internet connection, just, you know, the basic stuff. I try to call over there, they don't answer. I don't understand why those fucks still have jobs." He gave an exaggerated sigh.

Anders shook his head. "It's criminal, man."

"I'm telling you, it is." He glanced up. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I was wondering if you can do me a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"A huge favor. I was wondering if I could get access to one of the servers."

Frick squinted. He looked extremely dubious. "I don't know about that. Which one do you need?"

"Which ones are there? I was thinking Stantz."

"The R&D server?" Frick winced. "I don't even know if I have root on that. Venkman, Zeddemore, *maybe* Spengler... Tully's off limits, that's the accounting database... man, just even thinking about this, I mean, what would you need it for?" He could tell Frick was nervous, shifting slightly in his seat.

"Never mind," Anders said. "I just wanted to brush up on my UNIX skills. It's not important."

Frick brightened. "Oh, if that's the case..." He went on a long and overly helpful diatribe about his personal computer setup at home. Anders tuned most of it out.

Anders dreamed of Lila that night. One of those dreams where he opened his eyes, thinking he was awake and normal. She was there, that faded tattoo of

Celtic knotwork on her back, and she turned and mumbled something like, "You re..."

Then he woke up, this time for real. Was she trying to contact him, somehow? Or was it just a memory rolled up into a dream?

Anders finally got a chance to talk to Tom Hayes again the next day. He'd done some investigations of his own, but the whole thing really wasn't his strong suit.

One minute he was cooking himself some dinner, the next minute Tom was behind him, arms folded. It was another situation that seemed designed to unsettle him. And yet, from the expression on Tom's face, he got the idea that wasn't what was intended.

"So, have you found anything?"

Anders took a moment to respond. "Other than Ben being a firecracker, very little. I doubt this mad ghost is really on people's radars."

Tom nodded, folding his arms. "Some of the spooks I've talked to have given me some interesting information."

"Oh, really?"

Tom got another grim look on his face. "Yeah. Just more circumstantial stuff. But it's enough to make me think the thing's targeting actual personnel. It's going after people knowing they're from Orpheus. It stalks them, it hunts them down."

"That's awful," said Anders.

"I know. What's this about Ben being a firecracker?"

Anders shook his head. "Oh, nothing. I talked to him and he got it in his head that we should talk to the director. But it went nowhere, he just gave us the runaround."

Tom rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful. "Very interesting. Very, very interesting."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hmm, well, don't you find it strange that someone high up in the Orpheus Group is trying to cover up specific attacks against its operatives? Doesn't that seem the least bit unnatural or suspicious to you?"

"Well, I wouldn't say he was covering it up...."

"Either way, it bears some looking in to." Tom looked away, briefly, then glanced back, his gaze clear. "Have you heard from Lila yet?"

Anders sighed. "No." He thought about the dream. But that didn't count, did it? "Not yet."

Tom shook his head. "I thought so."

"What do you mean by that?"

Tom grimaced. "I have this idea. It's just a theory, really. But I was thinking, what if Lila's ghost is around, but someone has kidnapped it? Someone in Orpheus, who maybe doesn't want something to come out."

Anders just looked at him. "That's ridiculous. Why wouldn't they take Ben, too?"

"I don't know. Was he there the whole time?"

"No, he ran, but he—"

"See? Maybe what happened after he left is the reason why she's not around to talk to. Think about it, at least. I have to go. It's too tiring to stick around like this. I'll keep in touch, I'll promise you that."

"Good, I..." But Tom was gone.

Stuck at his place, surrounded by Lila's pictures, feeling slightly helpless about it all, Anders decided to take out his stress on a bottle of cheap vodka and some grape soda. He'd had better mixers. His favorite picture of her was taken by her friend. She was sitting on the deck in someone's back yard, smoking one of her God-awful Turkish cigarettes, with a big bright grin on her face, sunglasses on, her hair for some reason done up in pigtails, that raggedy old leather jacket of hers around her shoulders. There was something so goofy and supernaturally cute about it. He didn't know what.

He was halfway through his second big cup, wondering what it said that he was drinking alone, listening to music, when his cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket. Ben's number. He sighed and answered. "Lo."

"Hey, it's me."

"Hi there, Ben. You got any new information?"

"Nothing worth a damn. Got some info, something about a white car, from the scene where that thing went at me and Lila."

"A white car? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Fuck'f I know. Look, I got a question for you."

"What's that?" Anders took a sip from his drink.

"What do you think about a little revenge?"

"Revenge? Like what?"

"I say we take this fucker out. I think we can do it. Fuck running scared, let's set a trap, be ready, and jump the bitch."

"I... I don't know. We don't know anything about this thing. It's too much of a risk."

"Yeah, it is a risk. But sometimes you got to roll those dice, Andy. Look, just think about it some, and gimme a call back. I'll be here. You'll call me, right?"

"Yeah, I'll call you."

"Good, I'm out." Click.

Anders sighed, picked up Lila's picture. She gave that same, goofy grin at him. *Where the hell are you?* he thought, sadly.

That night he had another dream about Lila. He was tied down to something. He tried to move toward her but he couldn't. He felt panicked—wasn't sure whether it was she who was in danger or him, but he couldn't escape that terror that seemed to seep through him. She was looking at him, sad, but he couldn't make out her face much through the shadows. Her fingertips were just beyond his reach, no matter how hard he tried

to grasp at her. She was mouthing something at him, over and over, but he couldn't make it out.

He felt like screaming in frustration, but he couldn't. There was just silence, oppressive silence. Then she spoke, one word.

"Eurydice."

Anders woke up.

That morning he called Ben back. Ben answered sleepily. "Whu th'fuck?"

"Hey, it's Anders."

"Anders." Ben yawned. Loudly. "Hey dere."

"I'm in. Let's show this prehistoric bitch how we do things downtown."

Ben laughed, though he still sounded sleepy. "I like your style, man. Talk to you soon. You going into work?"

"Yep."

"Meet you in the gym, in like, uh, four hours or so."

"Sure thing." Anders hung up, feeling grim. Grim and hung over.

He made it into work a few hours later. He checked his email and his messages. One email stood out, a mass memo from Bradford Negley to all the operatives. It read:

To: Investigative Consultants
From: Bradford Negley, Senior VP,
Investigative Consulting
Subject: Suspicious PLE activity

All agents are to be on the alert for an extremely dangerous PLE known to be operating in the area. The PLE is described as about normal sized, faceless humanoid, with glowing white spots all over its body. The PLE is known to move quickly and often is much closer than it first appears.

Agents are to regard this thing with extreme caution. Do not attempt to interact with the PLE. If the PLE initiates hostile activity, you are ordered to leave the premises and be prepared to sign up for an immediate Incident Learning Process to benefit all field operatives. This order supercedes any other such order in the department.

Thank you.

Anders met Ben at the gym, a bit later. "Did you get the memo?"

Ben was doing some more lifting. He glanced up and shrugged. "Yeah, I skimmed it. What's going on?"

"Negley told everyone to lay off our boy. We're not to go near it."

Ben sighed. "So, that's how they deal with it, eh? Fucking typical, I swear."

Anders fidgeted, slightly. "Well, should we, uh, call it off then?"

Ben fixed him with an intimidating stare. "What the fuck do you think?"

"Well..."

"Don't you want to get that thing that got Lila?"

"Well, I—"

"Don't you want to keep it from getting at any more of your friends?" His tone probably had more menace than he realized.

"Yeah, uh, yeah, I do."

"That's what I thought." He released the weights and then rose up from the bench. He put a strong hand on Anders' shoulder. "Don't worry about a thing, all right? I've been through worse. Hell, you probably have yourself."

Anders just nodded, glancing away.

Later, when he was getting a soda, he caught a reflection of something weird in the machine, and turned to find a body slowly forming—made up of that same silvery gauze-like substance, translucent, like webbing made out of fog.

It spoke quietly. “Saw Hayes. He asked to pass on a message.”

Anders suppressed the chill that was running up his spine. It still got to him, no matter how much he dealt with this shit, it still got to him. “What’s that?”

“He says he saw the memo. Wants to talk to you about it, meet him in your car in the lot, this evening. Bring Ouija board.”

Anders nodded. “Thank you.”

The ghost had no expression. “My pleasure.” It faded from sight, as if it was never there.

That night, Anders sat alone in his car, digging through his CDs until he found some cheerful, old-school techno to listen to. He put it on low, then dug around and pulled out the Ouija board he’d stolen from the office. Funny how the Orpheus Group kept a good supply of those things around.

So Tom Hayes needed a Ouija board to communicate this time out. Andres supposed it made some sort of sense. People manifested as ghosts in different ways. The Group had a whole complicated system regarding that, all based on personality profiles, alpha wave emissions, you name it. When Anders projected as a ghost, he could, with little effort, be heard but neither seen nor felt. Actually taking on material form took much more effort, as Hayes had apparently done in the back of Anders car. For the older agent, moving a small, light object was easier than anything else. So Anders sat there, Ouija board in his lap.

He held the planchette lightly, the board on his knees, and waited.

Halfway through the CD, just as he felt he couldn't get any more mind-numbingly bored, it started to move.

H-E-L-L-O-A-N-D-E-R-S it spelled out.

"Hello, who am I speaking with?" he asked, carefully, keeping from blurting out, *Tom, right?* He really didn't know who he was talking to.

T-O-M was the reply.

"Why can't you materialize and talk to me?" he asked, first.

D-R-A-I-N-E-D

"Ah," he replied. "So, why'd you bring me here?"

Y-O-U-R-E-A-D-M-E-M-O

Anders guessed that was a question. "Yeah. I'm guessing it's from Ben's confrontation with Negley. Or maybe they're starting to realize this thing is really dangerous and don't want any more accidents."

M-A-Y-B-E

"You think differently?"

Y-O-U-S-E-E-N-L-I-L-A-Y-E-T

Anders frowned, a stab of emotional pain going through him. He tried to banish it. "No. Not yet."

I-C

I see. "What's going on, Tom? Have you found out anything else?"

S-T-R-A-N-G-E-T-H-I-N-G-S-A-F-O-O-T

There was a short pause, then the planchette began to move under his hands again.

M-O-R-E-I-N-F-O-M-E-N-I-N-S-U-I-T-S...another short pause, then... A-T-S-C-E-N-E-S-O-F-A-T-T-A-C-K-S

"Men in suits?" He thought of Ben's description. "Anything about a white car?"

The planchette quickly moved to YES. Another pause, then it spelled out W-H-Y

"Ben said one was around when Lila and he were attacked."

C-U-R-I-O-U-S

Anders glanced around. The parking lot was now mostly empty, the streetlights overhead were flashing on as twilight turned slowly to night. He felt suddenly very wary, like he was being watched. "Very. This thing gets stranger all the time."

A-S-K-Y-O-U

"Yeah?"

W-H-Y-T-H-E-Y-D-O-N-T-W-A-N-T-U-S-H-A-R-M-I-N-G-I-T

"They don't want us to harm it? You sure it's not the other way around?"

A long pause. Then the planchette began to move again.

A-B-O-U-T-L-I-L-A

"Yeah?"

T-H-I-N-K-M-A-Y-B-E-O-R-P-H-E-U-S-H-A-S-H-E-R

"Orpheus has her?" He shook his head, staring at the board. "Why would they do that?"

M-A-Y-B-E-S-H-E-K-N-O-W-S-O-M-E-T-H-I-N-G

Anders frowned. "Could they actually take her like that?"

T-H-I-N-K-S-O

He glanced back at the parking lot, the lights of the office building. It seemed so sterile, so lifeless there. "I don't know about that."

The planchette suddenly jerked in his hand. He glanced down, alarmed. The planchette quickly moved over a series of letters over and over again: D-R-I-V-E-D-R-I-V-E-D-R-I-V-E-D-R-I-V-E. He gasped and looked around, still feeling... unnerved. The hackles on the back of his neck were raised. He fumbled to turn the ignition, putting his foot on the break and shifting to drive. As he did so, the planchette moved itself to GOODBYE.

Anders sped out of the parking lot, confused and worried.

It's frustrating, tracking down leads, when it's not something you usually do. A lot of asking around, and Anders wasn't able to uncover anything substantial.

Nothing that led back to the ghost haunting Orpheus personnel. Nothing leading to Lila.

There was an aching for her that drove him onwards. Just to talk to her, know she's okay, establish some kind of communication. But instead all he had were her pictures, pictures of sunnier times, pictures that were frozen moments he didn't quite remember being the way they were depicted.

He dreamed of Lila again, a random annoying dream in which he was staying in a hotel, or something was going on in the hotel, and he kept trying to get to Lila but he couldn't. Everyone always said she'd just left. He woke up feeling completely unrested.

Early in the morning, Ben called his cell phone.

"Yo, it's me," Ben said.

"What're you doing up this early?" Anders asked.

"What are you talking about? Anyways, found anything new about our big bad?"

Anders sighed. "No, nothing. You?"

"Eh, not sure if it's related, but there was an article in the paper about the increase in crime in the neighborhood where Lila was attacked."

"You read the newspapers?"

"Learn something new about me every day, don't you, Andy?"

"Apparently." Anders stretched and cradled his phone, wandering into the kitchen to make himself some cereal. He was out of Captain Crunch but it looked like there was some Booberies left. "Found anyone willing to help out against this thing?"

"Fuck, people are chickenshit about it. Lots of talk. That's it. You?"

"Talked to Hayes. He thinks it's suspicious they ordered field operatives not to confront the thing."

"Suspicious? What the fuck? They're just a bunch of fucking bureaucratic cowards. End of story."

"I don't know. I didn't really have a good chance to talk to him. He just thinks something suspicious is going on, it sounds like."

Ben gave an audible snort. "Like what?"

"Well, uh, who's to say that the director's keeping us away from this thing because he's afraid for us?"

"What other reason would there be?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're protecting the thing for some reason."

"Bullshit."

"Oh, come on, there could be lots of reasons. Maybe they're protecting it because they know something we don't. Or maybe... maybe somehow they've found a way to get some use out of it." He thought about what Hayes had relayed. Men with suits. White cars.

"Use for it? I doubt it. Look. Management's dropping the ball around here. We can either roll over with these guys, or we can go get this fucking thing. I know Hayes at least understands that much. You know he's on the beach in a day, right?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, there you go. Give him two days after that, and we should all meet up. I might be going under sometime soon after, so we'll have to make it quick. But we can plan this out, get it done."

"That sounds good to me. I'm still worried, though."

"Don't be. Everything will work out fine. You'll see." Ben hung up.

Andres wasted the morning running errands and responding to personal email. Getting his life in order, his new, semi-single life, always with that haunting caveat that Lila could somehow come back. He told himself he wasn't just holding on, that the ready facts were there: she was strong-willed, capable, had lived through death before. In life she knew how to project as a ghost, and Orpheus projectors had always managed to make their way coherently into that strange next life. Except for her.

So she had to be missing. She had to just be temporarily gone, even if her body, her real physical presence would never, ever, be available to him again. She had to come back. She just had to.

But for now, he had to move on with his life.

He spent the afternoon sorting through the personal effects Lila's mother hadn't taken with her as mementos. Boxing and filing away. He found a picture of that old band-mate and ex-boyfriend of Lila's. She had once inadvertently mentioned how awesome the sex was, with stories of how he'd been bad for her, and probably vice versa, but they couldn't keep away from one another. How she talked about that primal feeling always left Anders wondering if that same base-of-the-spine connection was somehow lacking in his relationship with her, if Anders was somehow safe for her, but not tantalizing.

Did it matter? Probably not. When she died, that primal connection that had made him feel so threatened was severed. And not just with the ex-band-mate, but with everyone and anyone. Only her soul remained, only her passions, only her emotions, only her intellect. If even that.

Never again. Blah. Anders needed a lot of wine. And a bath. And probably more wine after that.

Midway through a long and luxurious bath, no lights on in the house, save for a collection of aromatherapy candles Lila had bought months ago when she went through some fad for them, Anders heard something: a thump, out there in the darkened flat.

He quirked his eyebrow, then submerged a little in his bath. The bath was relaxing, the wine getting to him just lightly. Just enough, not too much.

He heard something else, something... weird. He lifted himself half out of the tub and tried to stay as still as possible. It was nothing, it had to be nothing. But his heart was beating fast and loud, rattling in his chest.

Nothing.

He waited, then gave in to his paranoia and lurched out of the tub, wrapping a towel around his dripping wet body, stopping only to catch an unflattering glance at his widening waistline and pallid skin before stepping out of the cozy and humid confines of the bathroom.

The rest of the flat was empty and quiet. Night had fallen sometime during his bath (how long had it been, anyways?) and all the rooms were dark, undisturbed.

"Hello?" he called out, tentatively, then immediately felt like an idiot. He thought of that Ouija board in his lap, going over those letters in rapid succession: DRIVE-DRIVE-DRIVE.

No, it had to be nothing, just the house creaking. Nothing. He paused, as still as a statue. Silence. Silence. Nothing but silence. Just his imagina—

Wait. That sound. He craned his neck, trying to focus all of his being into listening, leaning forward almost unconsciously. The sound, it wasn't a human sound, it wasn't any natural sound at all. That noise, that incoherent babble that's in your head when you're stressed out, overtired, overtaxed, thinking too many thoughts and not completing a single one, not able to think, that was the sound he heard. A cadence both frenetic and whispery.

Someone here with him. Projecting, maybe, or already dead. Lila? No, would she come back like this? Wouldn't she try to comfort him? Speak directly to him?

He strained to hear. The sound was maddeningly quiet. What if it was her? He crept into the hallway and glanced up and down it. Front door and living room darkened, bedroom darkened, kitchen had a night light on.... No, wait. The night light had burned out long ago. And was never that eerie shade of blue. Never so quietly flickered, like candlelight.

That babble—it was louder now, but still just a whisper. But he could no longer dismiss it as a figment of his imagination.

Every instinct, every late-night session watching some old horror movie, overtired and stuffed full of popcorn, screaming at the television, “Don’t go into the basement!”—all of it was telling him to turn around. Come back later. Or hide.

He’d dealt with ghosts before. Hell, it was his job. This was just like that... except he wasn’t in the tanks, and unlike Lila, that meant he was pretty much powerless.

Logic told him that this was someone he knew. Someone with few social graces or just playing some horrible practical joke. And if not, if it was some random insane ghost or something that followed him here—he could, and would, run.

He tiptoed toward the kitchen, watching the flickering light. The incoherent muttering grew louder. It sounded like more than one voice. Was it even words at all? He could barely hear it over his heart thrumming in his chest, like a prisoner helplessly shaking the bars of a cell. Closer to the kitchen doorway, closer now. He took a step, then another.

The board under his foot creaked loudly. The humming immediately stopped, and Anders froze. Something in the kitchen clunked, tumbled over, hit the ground. The blue light flickered, then went out entirely.

Anders rushed into the room, flicked the lights on, and then squinted as his eyes adjusted. A tea-kettle lay on its side, having fallen off the stovetop. An envelope was turned over on the kitchen table, handwriting that he didn’t recognize scratched across its back. It read:

*It did not come here willingly
Look to your own for blame
Please do not ta*

The rest was cut off. Anders glanced up and around the kitchen. “Hello? Hello?” he called out. “Look, hey, whoever you are, I want to talk. Come back. Talk to

me. Come back!" He would have killed for a Ouija board right then. Damn it.

Two days later, Tom Hayes was up and willing to talk. Ben picked Anders up and they drove over to the restaurant where they were meeting Tom. Ben blasted hip-hop the whole way there, and talked over it. His car was nice, and in perfect condition, the stereo loud and crystal clear. One of those pine-tree fresheners stank up the entire car.

When they parked the car and walked in, Anders noticed that Ben had this badass image down. Every man that looked his way had his gaze met with a lazy challenge. Every woman had her figure inspected. All the while, Ben looked like he didn't care.

Tom Hayes was waiting for them in a booth by the back. A waitress hovered, shooting Tom concerned looks. He glanced up at Anders and Ben, looking flat-out exhausted.

"Hey," said Ben, more muted than usual.

"Hey, Mr. Hayes," said Anders, feeling stupidly formal. He looked the other man over. It was strange: as a ghost in his car, right after the funeral, he had looked so, well, so alive. Dynamic and forceful and passionate, filled with energy, strong somehow. Now, in life, he looked like death warmed over. He looked like a strong wind might blow him away.

"Gentlemen," Tom rasped. He motioned across the seat from him. Ben took up most of the space in the booth, while Anders sat uncomfortably on the edge, his legs out into the aisle.

"Yo, Tommy," said Ben. "So, what the fuck is the scoop?"

"Ben," said Tom. "Anders. I've talked to some of our recently deceased coworkers, and a few sleepers like the three of us, stuck on extended missions. Not a lot of people have anything concrete to say, but I was able to get some very interesting info."

Anders leaned forward. He thought of the night before. He wanted to blurt out what had happened, but maybe after Tom was finished. He glanced at Ben, who had put his arm up to rest on the window, giving Tom a curious look but trying to maintain a passive expression that still managed to appear tense and energetic. Barely restrained.

"Among the dead," rasped Tom, "our boy has a name. They call him the King of Eyes. There's a lot of rumors floating around about him. The fact is, people are scared of it. There are all sorts of ghosts all twisted with pain. Unintelligent, maddened, hideous. You've encountered them and so have I. But this one... it's an outsider. Those things attack it like they attack us. It's somehow outside of how we've come to see what ghosts are. They say it comes from... some realm that's beyond even death. Out there, where even the best of us can't go."

Anders raised both eyebrows, blinking. King of Eyes. KingofEyes. *Ovize*. He glanced over at Ben, who was frowning and shaking his head.

"Bullshit," Ben said, calmly.

Tom gave Ben a tired look. "You have something to contribute." It might have been a question. It came out like a statement.

"You're damn right I do." Ben furrowed his brow, glancing over at a passing waitress, then back at the two of them when she walked past. "Heh. 'Outside of how we've come to see what ghosts are,' my ass. This thing has built a rep, and that's the oldest thing in the book. It's tough, it can kick some ass. Your average spook, he has a rep too. No one likes to know there's another dog that's bigger and stronger. So when one comes along, they, you know, they think of a reason why it doesn't play by the rules. On the street, that badass down the block, he's a fucking psycho. That's why you say you backed down. He's not tougher than you, he's *crazy*. It saves face. Same goes in this sitch."

"So, what are you saying about the King of Eyes?" Tom asked.

"I'm sayin' you take out any garbage about it being all weird and alien and different. Those twisted ghosts, us young Turks call 'em spectres. The spectres, maybe they attack this thing, maybe that's just a story. We don't know. But we know people are scared, and that's the important thing. That people are talking about it, that makes it easier for us. People will remember when it comes by. Maybe it gets enemies, shit like that."

Tom nodded, thoughtfully.

"I have something to say," Anders suddenly said. They both turned to look at him. "I had a visitation last night, late last night. Some spook was trying to write a note to me, but I scared it off."

Tom leaned forward. "What did the note read?"

Anders pulled out the envelope and passed it over.

Tom frowned as he read it. "Hrm. Look to our own for blame. I wonder if he means Orpheus...."

Ben shrugged. "Or our own, meaning other living people."

Anders nodded, slowly. "But the other part, about it not being from around here. It seems to corroborate what those other ghosts said. At least in part."

Ben shook his head. "Again, maybe that's the hype. We don't know."

Tom grimaced. "It means we take this carefully either way. Too many unknowns, especially with our own company telling us to stay away from this thing. So, have you found anything else that's important?"

Ben related what little he'd found out. They both glanced at Anders, who shrugged, then felt somehow awful, like they were disappointed in him. "If I... if I could go under again, project, I have some talents that might be useful."

"Oh really?" asked Tom.

"Sure. Once I'm projecting, I can occasionally get glimpses of the past and future. I might... I might be

able to gather some information, if we went to somewhere where one of the attacks were.”

“That’s right,” Ben suddenly said. “You’re one of them fuckin’, what do they call it? Banshees.”

Anders glanced at Ben. “Yes. Lila wa-, is too. That’s how we met.”

Tom winced, then spoke over Ben as Ben was responding. “That’s a good thing to know. Either one of you on assignment soon?”

Anders shook his head but Ben nodded. “Sure,” Ben said. “In a few days.”

“What is it?”

“Can’t talk about it,” Ben said. “You know the drill.”

“I do,” Tom replied. He turned to Anders. “See if you can get back on assignment. You’re no good to us right now. We need you under, projecting.”

You’re no good, he heard. His hand instinctively reached under the table to his other wrist, running a finger on the thick scar that went down his arm. He kept his face up, nodded, and looked away. “Sure,” he said, dully. “I’ll get right on it.” His thoughts raced. *You’re no good to us right now. You’re no good to us alive.*

Driving back he wanted to listen to... something, but nothing he had in his car. Filled with frustration, he blasted the radio and all its thousands of ads, waiting for those one or two songs. Something cheesy and stupid and popular and all-consumer.

He hated this. Nothing changed for him. Brief spikes of happiness, fooling him into thinking he had turned his life around. Orpheus, then Lila. Lila was taken away from him, then the Orpheus Group turned into this fucking morass, all politics and half-truths. Just another job he didn’t understand.

Finally, after the seventeenth car commercial, a song came on. Bubblegum pop. But naturally, as soon as the song really started, the station faded out into static.

He banged his fist on the dashboard over the radio. Damn it. Modern radio, and even it broke down. Nothing worked anymore.

But slowly through the static, it came back. Someone talking, then... he recognized the voice. The voice from that television screen, back in the convenience store.

"Here we have a request, a dedication from Eurydice to her beautiful man," the voice said.

Anders blinked, just barely remembering he was still driving. He turned the volume up, static and all.

"Don't ever look back," the voice said. "Don't ever look back..." The voice faded into static, then the trashy pop song came back full force, louder than ever.

Back at the office, he arranged an appointment to see his project leader, Jane O'Farrell. She was locked in meetings all day long but could arrange some time in the afternoon.

He sat at his cubicle and read through his old email, mostly broad statements from the board, a few financial memos involving what could and could not be expensed by agents in the field, that kind of thing. A big "go team!" email from the new CEO, Jack Tilton, about Orpheus surpassing expectations, even in the face of competition from upstart companies like Terrell & Squib and Nextworld.

Terrell & Squib sounded like they had the tech angle down. Maybe they had equipment that could see ghosts, but did that make them effective fumigators like the Orpheus guys? Anders doubted it. He knew nothing about Nextworld. They were too new for him. He'd heard the name bandied about, that was all.

He kicked his feet up on the desk, surfed the web, listened to more of his coworkers idly chat about the latest layoff rumors. Time slowly passed until he was to meet O'Farrell.

She was late. He loitered outside her office until she arrived. Her office was nice and cozy, a refuge from the

cold and impassive cubicle maze. He sat down in the comfy chair across from her desk. She flashed a worried look at the lit voicemail button on her phone, then composed a smile for him. "What can I do for you, Anders?"

"Well... I was wondering if I could be put back on rotation."

"Don't you have affairs to put in order?" Her expression was a most saccharine version of concern.

He nodded slowly, glancing off to one side, hand pressed to his wrist, smoothing the scar with his fingers. "I do, and mostly have, but I don't have a lot to do right now, I..." He faltered, then stopped, then looked up, not quite meeting her eyes. "I want to work. Let me work."

Her look stayed concerned, or at least appeared so. There was a long pause before she spoke. "Well, now," she said quietly, turning to her computer. She inputted something, most likely a password, after a few points and clicks. "Hmm. How about this," she finally said, staring at the screen. "Judging from your, ah, personal history, I'd like to see you have a visit with an on-site therapist, just, you know, to allay a few fears and make sure you will be at your full potential." She sounded as if she only had his best interest at heart. But it was how she wanted to sound. "I'll arrange with Murth-, er, Dr. Chandrawati in Life Sciences right away." She looked up, cheerfully. "How does that sound?"

Anders frowned. "Fine, just fine. When can we arrange that?"

O'Farrell's reply was smooth. "Right away, I'm sure."

The appointment was a disaster. The therapist was younger than Anders, but with more degrees. Attractive, but oddly frumpy. Dr. Chandrawati liked to hire those types. Prints from post-Impressionists were framed on the wall, someone had sent her flowers. Anders would have bet one of his kidneys she sent them to herself. Though, if any of the rumors about the director

of Life Sciences were true, maybe Dr. Chandrawati had. The therapist asked probing, insightful questions, obviously knowing his past history with suicide. He wanted to scream, *what's the point?* but he doubted she'd understand.

She seemed to sense a tension within him, but he couldn't relate his need to go back under, to project again. He'd met better therapists than her. He had half a mind to tell her. She was easy to read, the way she ever-so-slightly shook her head when he answered a question and she thought she gained an insight about him. The way she used the edge of her voice when she knew she was right.

Anders had had a lot of experience with people like her over the years. He walked out of the session knowing it had gone badly, knowing he probably could have manipulated her into the answer he wanted, if he only hadn't felt so *wrong* about doing it.

The next day Anders loitered around the house. O'Farrell called in the afternoon. "I'm sorry," she said, "but..."

He tuned the rest of what she said out, looking at the muted television set. He said "yeah" in all the right places. Muttered a platitude at the end, hung up when he was supposed to.

He opened a bottle of wine, one he and Lila had been saving for their anniversary. But fuck it. He'd never see her again, he was just kidding himself, thinking otherwise. He downed the first glass in no time and poured himself another, then took it into the bedroom, lay down on his side of the bed he and Lila had shared. Defiantly, he kicked a leg over onto her side of the bed, but it didn't feel right. He moved it back.

He lit a candle, preferring its flicker to either the overheads or no light at all, and then lay back again, staring up at the ceiling. The first thought was corruptively subtle: He could kill himself, become a spirit, and help those around him, maybe even find Lila

somehow. But inside, when he confronted the darkness, he knew he was suffering. He knew he wanted out. He knew he wanted to be erased entirely.

The question was, simply, did he choose to exist or not?

Was there some greater good in suffering through the pangs of life, the cheap miseries, the hardships, the torments, the constant anguish and pain? In lying on his back and taking what life shoved down his throat? Or was it better to fight it all with his very life itself? To take control of who and what he was with one final slashing motion?

To die. To sleep. To fall into slumber forever. To no longer be affected by the heartache. To feel that back pain caused by his poor posture go away. To never again be afraid of some cancer growing inside him, of some internal organ failing one day, of his body wearing down, growing older, falling apart.

But to sleep meant to dream. And to die meant to become a ghost—to fall into the realm of death, that discovered country that all Orpheus agents knew so well. They knew what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil. And the dreams were sadly lacking. To never suffer like in life meant never to touch, never to kiss, never to shake hands, never to feel, never to experience anything save vicariously. And yet to still be trapped by one's passions.

How many suicides had woken up as ghosts, only to find themselves still trapped by those oppressive thoughts they had so sought to escape?

All of his life, in all of the pains and problems he had gone through—the horrible relationships, the dead-end jobs, the constant attempts to live up to the image his father had pushed upon him, the confusion, the utter agony of feeling so terribly alone and misunderstood—throughout it all, he'd taken comfort that he had the power to simply not be. No longer. The Orpheus Group had taken that away.

No, that wasn't fair. The Orpheus Group had only taken away the *illusion* that it was there. It had never existed to begin with.

He went to grab himself another glass of wine, and found the bottle empty. When did that happen? He sat up. Maybe there was another one around. *Whoa*. Head spin. *Maybe I drank too fast*. Lie down again.

Oh man, tired. So dizzy. Sleep calling. To sleep, perchance...

Anders woke up, hung over, to the sound of the doorbell ringing. At some point in the night he had tucked himself in, even pulled on his pajamas adorned with images of various processed snack cakes. In sleep he'd tangled his feet up in the covers, so when he rose to answer the door, he tripped and tumbled to the ground. He stood up, cursed, grabbed his robe and went to the door.

Tom was there. As soon as the door opened, he let himself in. "Did I wake you? I thought you'd be up by now."

Anders shook his head. "I'm on vacation, remember?"

"Ah," Tom rasped. He seemed more energetic than he had at the restaurant, but that wasn't saying much. "I just came by to check up on you, see if, you know, any more of those... incidents had happened."

Anders thought about how close he'd come to attempting to end his own life the night before. But that was probably not the kind of incident Tom was worried about. "No, nothing. Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

Tom shook his head, a bit sadly. "No, can't. On a specific diet because of the treatments."

"Treatments?"

"Yeah," rasped Tom. "Cancer."

"God," said Anders. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

Tom shrugged tiredly. "They say it's going into remission. It's not so bad as long as I stay under pretty

regularly. Maybe it has something to do with that near-death cryogenic stasis they put you in while you're projecting. I don't really know."

"No, I guess not."

"You know, it's weird, cancer."

Anders folded his arms. The bathrobe always felt so warm and comfortable to him, like a mother's arms wrapped around him. "What do you mean?"

"The thing about cancer is, it's life." Tom looked up. "Life, just a bit out of control. Cells dividing when they shouldn't. Growing and growing. Interfering with the way the body works, spreading around in the blood until they're all over the place. Tumors are growing, pressing against glands and interfering with the way your marrow works. Clogging up your lungs, pressing up against your heart. You get so choked up with life it kills you dead. It's funny."

Anders didn't really have a response to that. He furrowed his brow, concerned. Wishing he could somehow help, knowing there was no way. It was one of the painful things about people, wanting to step in, fix things, make things better. Knowing there was really no way.

Tom glanced back at Anders, snapping out of his reverie. "So, when do you go back?"

"I don't," said Anders, defeated. "They've got me on indefinite leave, on account of bereavement and..." Should he say it? It didn't matter. "And my mental state."

Tom hrmed. "So, that's their reason?"

Anders raised an eyebrow. "That's what they told me. Why?"

"You said they classified you as a banshee, right? One of those mediator types, the ones that always seem so vocal when they project?"

"That's right."

"And Lila was too?"

Anders narrowed his eyes. "Yes, Lila is, why?"

Tom looked away. "Those other two sleepers. They were... sorry. They are classified as banshees too. I think that's what the King of Eyes hunts down."

"But... but why?"

"That's another little mystery to add to the collection. I'm sorry, I don't know. But it seems too strange a coincidence to overlook."

"I'd say."

"It's possible, Anders, that they put you on indefinite leave to keep you alive. The psychological reasons could be a smokescreen. They could be protecting you."

"Do you think?"

"Either that or they don't want to provoke it yet."

"You fill me with such inspiration, Fearless Leader."

Tom grinned weakly and sighed. "I'm sorry. I wish I had better news."

"Do you know anything else?"

"Very little. Ben's investigating the area of town where the violent crime has drastically increased. He thinks it's our King's new haunts. I'm not so sure."

Anders finally sat down. "Why not?"

Tom shook his head. "You know how all the ghosts we agents meet, they're all recently departed, right?"

"Yeah, like about three years dead at the oldest."

Tom nodded, firmly. "Right. And we know some of the ghosts, they don't come out right. And those ones can, over time, sort of corrupt the weaker ghosts—the ones that don't have many memories, or just repeat the same event over and over again."

"The blips, right."

Tom smiled faintly at the term. "Whatever you call them. What I'm trying to get at is, maybe that's the natural progress of things. But when things get bad, maybe nature has a sort of failsafe, a way to wipe everything clean after a while. Because, if not, everyone who died would quite literally go to hell, driven mad by those beasts."

"It's possible." Anders shifted slightly. "I don't really know. It makes sense, but..."

"But it doesn't quite explain everything, I know. It's just a working theory. But by that theory, I'd say the rise in violence that Ben is looking into is just part of the cyclical nature of the afterlife. It will get worse and worse and worse. And then..." Tom swept his hand through the air, as if pushing papers off a desk.

Anders nodded, frowning.

Tom leaned forward, his eyes suddenly filled with that intensity he had before, while projecting. "But if the rumors are true, the King of Eyes found a way to survive it. He, or really *it*, found some hiding place, that 'outside of the realm of death' thing. And was content to stay there, until drawn out."

"So... This is interesting and all, but what does it tell us? It's old and scary."

"It's old and scary and it's a *key*, Anders. Those eyes are symbols, clues to what might lie beyond the death we already know. The Orpheus Group has made a lot of money by unraveling the secrets of death. The top brass don't want this killer dead because they want to study it, to profit from it. They may not be the ones who brought it here, but I'll bet they'll be damned if they're not going to take advantage of it."

"Jesus. That does make sense. So what do we do now?"

Tom got a firm look. "We put a wrench in their plans. Or we get a better look at it ourselves."

"How do we do that?"

"I don't know. Not yet." He thought for a while, then looked back. "You know people in Engineering, right?"

"Yeah, I do. I tried to get some info out of them, but nothing turned up."

"There might be something on the machines."

"It'd take a lot of time to sift through all the case files, and anyways, the security is pretty tight on those boxes."

"It can't be too bad. From what I hear, those guys don't know how to do their job. And they have that moron Farquand running the show."

Anders snorted. "They're professionals, Tom. Dr. Farquand is a bit... yeah, she can be hard to deal with, but she's eons better than Raddicks. That guy was an ass. He hired me, I should know."

"I'd still like to know how he got fired," Tom said, sounding slightly mysterious about it.

"He quit. I told you, he was an ass. You should have seen him fight with the head of IT, what's his name, Porter. Raddicks lost his shit right in the middle of the office. Stupid office politics."

Tom laughed. "Guess you're right."

"Now," said Anders. "You want to talk about a department of incompetents, talk about IT. I don't think I've ever seen one of them do any work."

"Hey," said Tom. "I know some of those guys. They're good."

"Oh sure, good at playing the latest version of Quake or whatever new networkable first-person shooter is out. Good at scratching their asses or refreshing their browsers to reload slashdot.org. But actual work, no."

"I've never had any problems getting anything done with them. In fact, they're always eager to help me out."

Anders blinked. "Oh, really?"

"Sure, Porter's an old friend of mine, since before either one of us came to Orpheus. I like his team, too."

Anders thought about Frick and his busted computer. "Really," Anders said. "Isn't that interesting?" Maybe he wasn't so useless alive after all.

That night, Anders had a dream. He could feel a familiar touch. It sent a feeling of warmth through him, a sort of impossible joy. He could hear the cadence of her breathing. He tried to open his eyes.

"Don't," said Lila. "Don't look." Her voice was husky and soft.

"Oh, God, I've missed you so much!"

"I know," she said, in the dream. "You must promise me something."

"Anything!"

He felt the light touch of her fingertips brush across his body. "When you next hear my voice, don't look back. Promise me that."

"I promise."

"I love you, Anders." She seemed distant.

"Lila, I lo..." but somehow, he knew she was gone.

A day later, Anders walked into Engineering's section to meet Frick. Ben was already under, his body cryogenically frozen in the tanks and his spirit up and active. Anders hadn't had a chance to talk to Ben before he went under, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Frick brightened when he saw Anders, and turned to lean on the cubicle walls. "Yo, yo, yo! Anders! My home slice! I heard the best new joke. You see, there's this liberal and this conservative, and they both get mugged, and the liberal's like, you know, all asking and uh, wants to..."

Anders cut him off. "Hey Frick, I've got a surprise for you."

"Wants to, you know, ask all about their broken home and, wait, a surprise?" Frick got a suspicious look. "What do you mean, dude?"

"Well, are you still having computer problems?"

Fricks gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh yeah, I'm gonna have to place a call; this is getting ridiculous. I know it's just a video card problem, I mean, how hard can that be?"

"You're not the only one, right?"

"Fuck, just about everyone at one point or another. Those IT guys, I mean, sheesh, dude. Cooshy job, playing video games all day long."

"Eight requests backed up, all in Engineering, correct?"

"Uh...I think so. Why?"

"Hold on." Anders turned around and waited, glancing at the doorway. It only took a few moments for Tom Hayes and Merick Porter—Vice-President in charge of Information Technology—to walk in, followed by a cadre of IT guys. Porter looked like he was inspecting broken pipes at a sewage treatment plant. Tom hobbled next to him, sharing some private joke. Porter laughed politely.

Frick seemed defensive. "What's going on here?"

A surly, overweight Asian guy in a LinuxWorld T-shirt came up and gave Frick the evil eye. "You got a video card problem?" he asked, his voice artificially bland.

Frick nodded, then looked at Anders, mystified.

The IT guy sighed, like he was Sisyphus rolling that rock up the hill for the two hundred thousandth time. "Hold on." He stepped into the computer, played around with a few things, shut the computer off, opened it up, replaced the card. The whole process took about fifteen minutes. Afterwards the IT guy turned to Frick and said, "I'll close the ticket. Later."

"Later, dude," said Frick, out of reflex. His face was slack with confusion.

Afterwards, Anders said, "So, about that favor I was going to ask you."

Frick's expression grew pained. "You want on which server?"

"Stanz. That's the R&D server, right? I might need to do something on Spengler, the field deployment records server, too."

"To brush up on your UNIX skills, no doubt," said Frick, sullenly. He didn't look like he believed it.

"Exactly," Anders lied, smiling.

Frick looked mournfully at his new computer. The image looked perfect, unflawed. "Okay," he said, in a sigh. "Tonight, late at night. Only looking around. You don't change or delete anything, you don't do anything

destructive, and you sure as hell never tell anyone I did this for you.”

“Frick, you’re the best!”

“Shut the fuck up, dude. Get out of here. I’ll see you tonight.”

Even with full access to the two computer servers, Anders still found a lot of the files he wanted to look at locked from him, behind layers upon layers of security. His access wasn’t root access, but still, there should be enough information. Tom sat next to him, but the older man looked worn down, like he might pass out at any moment. Anders hunched over the computer, hands fluttering as he inputted complicated grep commands to look for word strings among thousands of files.

Too much information. He wasn’t sure what might be useful, not yet. He made copies of what he could, committed to memory some of the rest. He started on Spengler. After doing general scans for incident reports regarding their favorite, King of Eyes, he tried to find the ILP Ben had filled out. Failing at that, he then went digging around for info about the mission they had been on when Lila had died. Again, most of it was locked to him, but he found some information that seemed to suggest that Lila had traded a number of emails with her project leader just before the mission started. Odd.

Anders moved to Stanz. Maybe he’d find some information about hunting this down on some of the R&D projects. Nothing came up in his searches regarding any kind of hostile or potentially hostile PLEs that seemed to point to the King of Eyes. Again, a dead end. But he found a roster of current projects, most of which either made little sense to him or were patently mundane: improvements to the sleeper tanks, a proposal for a new security pass system, and so on. But a bunch of them made reference to Terrell & Squib. Weird. Again, following those leads led to locked, encrypted files.

He read and read, late into the night. Tom had long since nodded off, though he had probably wanted to stay up. His body was failing him.

As far as Anders could tell without getting into those locked files, a large majority of the projects seemed to be about combating Terrell & Squib's "technological advantage."

Anders leaned back in his chair and frowned. His brain felt dry from all the computer work, almost wrung out. He looked at his watch. Nearly 5:00 a.m. In a few hours, people would start filing in to start the day's work.

Nothing to be gained here. Might as well go home, get some sleep. He jumped to Frick's home directory, was about to log off, then stopped. He shouldn't go through Frick's personal projects. But he knew they'd be open to him, or at least some of them.

He thought of Lila briefly, wondering where she was. Then he leaned forward again and started rooting through his friend's files. As he suspected, most of them were also locked, but Frick's notes weren't.

A lot of them had to do with some kind of "recovered" Terrell & Squib device. Frick used the word "attunement" a lot, spent a lot of time analyzing it, pulling his hair out. Notes about field tests, notes about deadlines, pressure from on high.

Then he came across a note that sent a chill up his spine:

If this attunement device does what I think it does, the applications are tremendous, if chilling. Farquand suggests the luring of hostile PLEs away from field operatives, but I personally think that is far too simplistic an application.

If field operatives projecting as PLEs—and PLEs that are field operatives themselves—represent nearly the ultimate in espionage, this Terrell & Squib device represents the first steps in attempting to combat it. Simply put, when the device is attuned to a hostile PLE, it's essentially a

remote weapon designed to disrupt such espionage, possibly killing and scattering Orpheus operatives.

For now, the device seems to only be able to attune to one specific PLE, and only after an exhaustive process, but should this barrier be overcome, the applications become even more interesting. Think of a trap in which projecting operatives and allied PLEs become attuned to the machine, and effectively controlled by it. One could quickly raise an army of enslaved PLEs... should advances be made.

This may be why several of the Board, notably Del Greco, have shown such interest.

Anders leaned back, faintly shocked. "Tom, I've found something." He glanced over. "Tom, wake up."

Hayes blinked and looked up, blearily. "Wha-?"

Before either one could speak, they heard Frick lumbering up.

Frick stared at Anders, his expression dulled. "Hey."

Anders watched him. "Hey."

"Did you find the information you need?"

Anders nodded, once. "I did. You and I need to talk, though."

Frick sighed. "I thought so. Not here. Let's go."

The location Frick chose was a darkened park, down by the river. He moved his large, wide body down the pathways, glancing about nervously, hands in the pockets of his jacket. The night air was chilly but not too cold, the sky was moonless. The road intersected the park nearby, and the area Frick chose had a view of the broad stone bridge that crossed the river.

"It was the device you were researching that brought that... thing to attack Lila, wasn't it?" Anders asked. He felt surprisingly calm.

"I think so," said Frick, broken with sadness. "But I don't really know."

"Why not?"

"The device, and the project, it was taken away from me. I'm on something else now, but I can't help

but feel, well, somehow responsible, you know?" He glanced up at Anders, looking at him out of the corner of his eye. "It's been eating me up."

Tom watched, thoughtfully. "Who has the device, now?"

"I don't know, I don't know. Certain people on the board are involved. It's all over Farquand's head. I could swear that one of the outside consultants that I've been working with is working for the Pentagon, but I don't really know."

"How long has this been going on?" Tom asked. He seemed tense.

"A while, but we couldn't control it before. It wasn't tested on agents before, at least not to my knowledge."

"But it was tested elsewhere?"

"I, ah. Not on you guys. It only works, you can only attune, you know, the crazed PLEs. The ones with nothing left. The device, it just feels evil to me. I don't know how it was made, it just... doesn't *work* right." Frick seemed almost in a panic.

Anders attuned his voice, slowly. He tried to sound soothing. "It's all right, speak quietly. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Tom sounded tense. "But it was tested on the field. They brought those things, those spectres to wherever the device was."

"I think so," said Frick, his voice small. He kept his hand in his pocket.

"Damn them," said Tom, softly.

Anders watched Frick, suddenly feeling wary. The park felt cold to him, too, this late at night. "Do you know how they got the ghost they did? The one they call the King of Eyes. Where did it come from?"

"I don't know!" said Frick, whimpering. "I don't..." He stopped.

"Frick?" Anders asked.

Frick glanced up, eyes doll-like. His voice sounded twisted and strange. "I do think this has gone far enough." Frick drew out an automatic pistol.

"Oh, Christ," Tom said. "Frick's been possessed."

Anders watched the gun, his heart suddenly racing. Back in his Engineering days, he'd groaned every time Frick brought out his weapon. The man was an enthusiast shooter, but he also took far too much pleasure from his concealed carry permit. "Well, fuck," Anders said eloquently.

Tom was looking around, up in the air. "Who are you? Are you with Orpheus? We're operatives too."

Frick advanced. He released the pistol's safety and pulled back the slide, chambering a round. "That is not important," he said in a voice not his own. "Too much information has passed."

Tom backed off, eyes widening. But Anders held his ground, steeling his nerves. "Go ahead," Anders said softly. "You going to kill me? Do it. You'll still have to deal with me."

Frick stopped, hesitating, his eyes still doll-like and strange.

Anders shook his head, feeling menacing. He said through clenched teeth, "Put the fucking gun down. I call your bluff, asshole."

Frick's body lowered the gun. Anders glanced down at it, watching Frick. Frick turned and looked, up at the bridge. Then he turned back, brought the gun back up. "Oh, hell. We'll just call it in to clean you up...."

Before he could fire, the gun jerked upwards. Then stones, branches, and leaves began to swirl up and around, battering Frick and sending him tumbling back. The gun clattered out of the possessed engineer's hands, and Tom rushed over to recover it.

Anders turned back to see Ben materializing behind him. Ben's ghostly form seemed just as dynamic as he was in life, but somehow cut in harsher angles. His eyes danced with a merry anger.

Ben barked out a laugh. "Good thing for your candy asses I happened along, huh!" He suddenly snarled. "Motherfucker." He raised up his hands, brought them

down, and rocks scattered through the air to slam into Frick's unconscious body. "That's right, don't get up."

Tom checked the gun, uneasily. He turned to Ben. "Which operative was it?"

Ben shook his head. "No one I've seen. She wore a suit."

"Weird," said Anders. He saw the bruises beginning to form on Frick's face, even in the gloom of night. He moved over, kneeling down to make sure he was okay. "Is she gone now?"

"I think so. I think I spooked her good, the bitch."

"Hold on," said Tom. He was peering up at the bridge. "There's a car there." He began to move through the underbrush, up toward it. Anders looked up at the bridge. He could make out a white sedan under the flickering streetlight.

"This got fucked up real good, huh?" said Ben, bitterly. "So, what the fuck is the scoop?"

Anders began to explain what he could of the story. He got about halfway through when Ben stopped him. "Hear that?"

"Hear what?" A small breeze filtered through the trees, rustling the leaves slightly. It felt even colder.

"Oh, shit." Ben's voice sounded very, very small. "Do you see it? I don't."

Anders looked around, desperately. The darkened woods held only shadows. He thought he could see a figure moving, darting in the underbrush, but... no. That had to be his imagination playing tricks on him. It wanted to see an enemy. The hackles on the back of his neck were raised. And in the breeze, he could just barely hear, or thought he could, some kind of babble.

A low, guttural mutter, a thousand voices. And then, they faded away.

Ben's look was of sheer panic. "I can hear it! It's on to us! Fuck!"

Anders turned to him. "Dematerialize and get the hell out of here!"

Ben looked back at him. "I can't outrun it. I tried the last time, if it wasn't for Lila—" His voice cut off. He looked up toward the bridge. "Tom said there was a car up there. Let's go."

Ben was already moving silently through the trees, as if he wasn't even there. Anders looked down at Frick's unconscious form and momentarily felt sorry for him. Then he caught something out of the corner of his eye and looked up, but saw nothing.

He couldn't hear the babble, but he could feel it, almost. Like when something rang at just the right frequency and made his teeth feel all weird and hollow in his mouth. He could feel the babble like a rippling sensation up his spine. He turned and sprinted toward the bridge, dodging bushes and trees. He ran as fast as he could. He was certain the thing was just behind him.

Up on the roadway, he found Tom pointing a gun at a man in a suit. The man was carrying something in his arms.

"Do you work for Orpheus?" Tom asked, accusingly.

"No!" the man said, terrified. "I work for Terrell & Squib. I'm just a technician!"

Tom uttered a low expletive. Ben hovered nearby. "Someone get the keys to the car."

Anders looked at the car. A woman was passed out in the driver's seat. Probably the woman who had possessed Frick below. Tom glanced at Anders. "It's the King of Eyes," Anders said. "It's here."

Tom swiveled his head back at the man, keeping the gun steady at his chest. "Turn that god-damned thing off."

"I already did," the technician replied. "But it's too late."

"It is too late," Ben said, looking at the trees. He sounded terrified. Ben had never sounded terrified to Anders. It didn't sound right. "There it is."

Anders looked where Ben was looking. But all he could see was darkness in the trees. Another breeze brushed through, rustling the leaves again. He could

hear a mutter, a whisper, under it all. It sounded utterly mad.

"I'll hold it off. You guys get in the car," Ben said, looking determined.

"No!" said Anders.

Tom glanced at the technician. "Go get the keys. Pull the girl out of the car. Drop that thing there." The technician did as he was told, slowly opening the door and putting the device down on the ground.

Ben turned to Anders, looking ashen. "I'm gonna go now. C-come back and kick this bastard's ass. Promise me!"

"I promise!" But Ben had already faded from view.

Anders turned, looking at Tom for a second. He focused on the gun, then scowled. It was now or never. "Tom."

Tom glanced at him, but kept his eyes mostly on the technician.

"Ben won't make it without help."

Tom blinked. "There's nothing we can do to help him now. We need to get away."

"No, there's something." Anders gave him a level look. Around him the babbling had grown, become more audible. No trick of the imagination, it sounded like scattered thoughts in his head. It sounded like a swarm of bees trying to recite Shakespeare.

"What?" Tom asked.

"Shoot me."

"Are you kidding?"

"Do it. Do it quickly."

"I can't kill you."

Anders pulled up his sleeve. "See this?" He showed off the scar. "I've tried suicide so many times I've lost count. I've accepted death, so much of my life I've longed for it. I wish it so."

"You're mad, Anders."

"I can help Ben."

Tom glanced at the technician. Tom frowned. He seemed deeply unhappy. The babble grew around them

all, and in the corner of their vision, the trees took on the form of dancing madmen, madmen who were banished when they turned to look directly into the darkened woods. "All right," said Tom, in a measured voice. "But he's going with you." He lifted the gun up and shot the technician. Anders watched the gun recoil back.

The technician gasped and fell, crying out. Tom shot him again.

"What the fuck?" Anders said. "You *murdered* him!!"

Tom looked tired. "I've worked at Orpheus so long, I've started to forget what death really is. And Ben needs his help."

Gravel and rocks dusted up all around them. Whether Ben's work, or the thing attacking Ben, it was hard to say.

Tom leveled the gun at Anders. "Are you ready?"

Anders swallowed and nodded, trying to banish that last instinct for self-preservation. "Do it," he choked.

Tom stared at Anders, stepped forward, pointing the gun at Anders' forehead. They locked eyes. Anders could see uncertainty in Tom's eyes. "Do it!" he said again.

Tom looked back at the dead technician, and seemed to crumble. "Father forgive me," he mumbled. His hands shook.

Anders reached forward, putting his hand on the gun. With every ounce of his will, he pushed his forehead to the barrel of the gun, then squeezed Tom's trigger finger.

The shock of the blast sent him hurtling backwards, tumbling limply away. The pain was insane and quick to spread from his head to the rest of his body. Just for a moment, he thought to himself, *Hey, so that's what it's like to be shot in the face*. Then he started floating upwards, and slowly, he righted himself.

Anders looked around. Everything had turned to chaos.

He could see Tom trying to get his senses together. He turned to look at the technician, who was staring at his hands, standing over his own body. Ben was back, but his face was scarred and almost chitinous, as if really bad acne had somehow thickened and toughened his skin. Ben was laughing and clutching his head. The laugh was biting and sharp.

All around him, the gibbering was like a thousand incoherent screams. He scanned the trees and spotted the King of Eyes immediately.

It was a grayish thing, filled with glowing eyes that blinked slowly and without pattern. It crept along, like molasses, then suddenly appeared somewhere else, closer. It's face was a blank, dark slate. It was circling Ben as Ben laughed and ignored it. It was stalking him.

Anders tried to attune himself to the gibbering noises, the screaming from the apparition. He shut his eyes as he banished that initial shock of death once and for all. *Now is not the time.* He had to help Ben.

He listened to the cadence of the howling, and tried to find its rhythm. It was there. As insane as the rhythm was, it was there. The thing was in pain, tremendous pain. Perhaps it had been in pain for years, perhaps thousands of years. But blinding, terrible, excruciating agony was all it had known. He could tell it was sad, he could tell it was confused. He could tell it did not wish to harm, but that did him, or any of them, no good.

He opened his eyes. For now, the King of Eyes was focusing on Ben, who seemed to be fighting to control himself. Ben suddenly lifted an arm up and lashed out in the direction of the thing. The scattered rocks flew at it, through it. Ben screamed at it in fury.

I have to try to calm it, Anders thought. There was a certainty in this; he knew he must. But even with that certainty, a tiny voice inside him urged him desperately to reconsider. *Isn't that what Lila would have tried? It didn't work for her, so why will it work for you?*

He opened his mouth to sing the cry that had earned him the banshee descriptor. He put his heart,

his soul, his everything in the universe, into a song that would calm it, calm anything, soothe and pacify. He worked the tones of his voice until they were a counterpoint to the chaotic voice of the King of Eyes.

As soon as he did so, Ben shook his head and looked more alert. But he turned to Anders, his face shocked and terrified. "No! *Don't!*" he shouted.

The King of Eyes had noticed Anders, too. Its multiform screams had turned into piercing shrieks, its movements still slow but the jumps and leaps it took between them sped up. And as it closed in, its howl turned guttural and ugly. It reached out toward Anders and his arms and body began to feel like they were burning.

Behind the apparition, Tom moved toward the device and picked it up. He was unaware of what was going on all around him.

Ben shouted helplessly, "No!"

Anders stared down at his arms. To his surprise, he found eyes opening on them, glowing bright white, the irises slightly dimmer. He tried to keep singing, to change the tonal inflections again, to soothe, soothe, soothe some of that pain and misery. To heal.

He looked at the thing. It had no face and no expression, but it seemed to be in agony, draped in utter sadness now. What leaked from the multitudinous eyes looked like mercury tears.

Ben leapt at the thing, desperately. It lifted an arm and sent him flying backwards, through Tom, who was trudging over to the bridge.

Anders fought the pain, tried to keep control of himself as he raised the pitch of his song, shouting it, refusing to be mastered, refusing to be silenced. It was as if... by attuning himself to the song he was allowing a part of it inside of him, a part that threatened to swallow his thoughts and memories entirely just by the sheer force of its personality.

The babble was in his head now, taking over his thoughts. *It has me it has me i did not want to come back*

i cannot help myself not in control yet it was too much (have seen cities on fire, armies on the march, innocents put to the sword) pulled back will be overtaken will be used will go mindless have seen too much (nations falling to disease and plague, souls rising from carts carrying the dead) cannot stop seeing never stop seeing will have me they will have me they will—

Anders shook his head, trying to banish the thoughts all around him, banish the pain, concentrate on the task at hand. He tried to shut his eyes but realized he couldn't, that now, now he could see all around him....

Behind his back, Tom put the device on the wall of the bridge, then began firing shots into it. Once he had emptied the clip, he tossed the thing into the river.

The King of Eyes flickered slightly, and its voice modified, it seemed to revel in its freedom. It did not stop itself from assaulting Anders, though.

Anders, it said, *your name is anders i miss her i can't stop thinking about (the horses entered Jerusalem, ankle-deep in blood from the slaughter on the mount) her but you but you but you do not stop me I must I must you see she is rising I must I must I must I must...*

Anders broke off his song and began screaming in agony as the pain laced through him now completely. But he heard another voice mixed in with the babble.

"I'm here," the voice said.

"Lila," he replied.

"Remember your promise."

Don't look back. But how? And why? Did she not want to see him, or was it—was it a defense to keep from being destroyed by this thing's madness? It felt like his senses were pushing out, overwhelming him.

"I can't," he said. "I... I don't know how."

"Try," she said calmly. "Trust me."

Failed Kundalini yoga classes. Meditation, never his strong point. But he searched through his pain-stricken mind and found something, anything to grasp on to. He focused on Ben, Ben's face. Kept singing

calmly, while his form began to dissipate under the stress, lose the core of its being. *No time*, he thought.

His vision narrowed to concentrate on Ben's face, nothing else. The thousands of thoughts were still there, but he shut them out. Ben did not look well. Pain, fear, confusion played on his features, like children released to recess after too many hours studying in a dull and featureless room. He watched Ben turn and look at him, then behind him. Watched the shock of recognition on his face. "Oh god, Lila," he heard Ben say. "No, it can't be. You've turned..."

The pain was too much. The King of Eyes was destroying Anders, even if it didn't mean to, couldn't help itself. He was losing, he realized. He was dying, for real.

"I won't let you take him," Lila calmly said. "I'll rip him to pieces if you try."

She wants me to live, she wants to be with me. She needs to be with me. That feeling heartened him, it gave him the will to live again. He focused again on Ben, realized he was screaming with anger, moving toward and past Anders. She wasn't talking about the King of Eyes, Anders realized. She was talking about Ben.

"Oh, God," he said. "No!"

"Anders," she said. "You're almost there. Forget about Orpheus. *Don't look back.*"

He realized, then, the choice she was giving him. Give in to the evil and misery of this creature, dredged up from some hopeless and evil place beyond even the realm of death. Give in and be with her, not knowing what the cost to himself might be. Or cling to his past, and be destroyed, as simple as that.

And he had only seconds to decide.

Anders focused on Ben once more. He wasn't a part of this. A bystander. "Get the hell out of here, Ben," he said.

"No way! I'll save you, man! I didn't save Lila, but they won't take you away from us!"

"Give it up. You're outnumbered. You don't have a chance."

"Two to one odds, man!" Ben's voice almost gleamed with confidence. "They ain't so bad! I can take this King and whatever Lila's turned into."

"No, Ben. Three to one."

"What?" Ben stopped. He heard Lila scream, and the scream seemed to go through Ben, weakening him, shattering the strands that made up his being.

"Go." Anders said it once, firmly, fiercely. Ben staggered back, then fled. Lila's voice turned from angry shrieks to callous laughter. *I hope this is worth it*, he thought. It was easy to modulate his voice to be heard by the living. He didn't dare try to figure out where Tom Hayes was, but called out so the living could hear: "Tom, I found her. The King of Eyes won't..." He grunted in agony. "...haunt Orpheus anymore. Run."

He cut his concentration and focused solely on survival.

The world around him was a nightmare. He rose up, having no idea how much time had passed. It felt like his soul had been shattered then pieced back together with masking tape. He looked down at his arm. The scar had grown. Now it looked like a long, thick slug, glowing a faint green and twitching ever so slightly, as if it was having a restless sleep. He turned his arm over and realized his forearm was covered with what looked like tattoos or drawings of the eyes that had been glowing on his body.

Andres looked up and around him, then saw Lila.

Her face was gaunt and puffy, her hair dye-damaged and scraggly. Her breasts sagged, bones stood out from her frame, yet a latticework of cellulite rested on her thighs. Everything she had hated about herself shone tenfold in her looks now.

Those marks of eyes covered her from head to toe. She watched Anders, then spoke, her voice unearthly in it's cadence. Beautiful.

"I finally have you again," she sang.

"Where is he?" Anders asked, nervously.

"Close. We must prepare. An attack will come soon, we just help defend him."

"Who will attack?"

"It doesn't matter. More of the mindless ones, or those living agents again."

"Why are they after him?"

"The secrets they think he holds. His power and strength. But they won't have him. He will return when he is ready."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, and I don't think he remembers. There's another one he took, she calls him Ozymandias, after the poem. It doesn't matter. Everything will be explained in time."

"Yes," he replied, with a fierce smile.

It took only one look into Lila's fanatic gaze to banish all the lingering doubts nagging at him. He had been made anew, a dark and terrifying form. He would follow his King until the ends of Time itself, with the love of his life and death by his side.

DIA

DE LOS

MUERTOS

ALLEN

RAUSCH

The black tower stood like an iron spike in a field of daisies. *Not that the Zona Rosa buildings can be compared to daisies*, Eileen Savitch thought. Rather, it was that the new Orpheus S.A. building that rose from the heart of Guadalajara's business district was so distinctive. *Distinctively ugly*, she mused as the black glass box drew closer.

The cab she had taken from the Guadalajara airport had been inching its way through the prosperous commercial district for close to twenty minutes as the driver cursed at the thick traffic. Through the window of the cab she could see well-dressed attractive people ambling along the sidewalks under large billboards advertising a variety of products. She noted something called Jarritos along with Tapatio Salsa Picante, Don Julio Tequila, and a few inevitable vanguards of the American cultural juggernaut, including O'Tolley's restaurants and Coca-Cola.

She removed a small handkerchief from her purse and delicately wiped her brow. The heat was brutal and wet in the heart of the city, and the noxious stench being pumped out by the clogged traffic didn't help matters.

"Is this your first trip to Mexico, señora?" the driver asked in Spanish.

"No, but it is my first to Guadalajara," Eileen replied in the same language.

"Then, if you are looking for a great place to have dinner, you must try the Santo Coyote down on Avenida Americas. The *carne asada* is superb."

I'm sure it is, she thought, and I'm sure you get a nice kickback from the owners for steering tourists there.

"Thank you, but I don't plan on being here very long."

"Come on, Eileen, you still have to eat—even if I don't." The voice came from the driver, but something was different. She looked at the young man's face in the rearview mirror, and for a brief moment his eyes gave

off a pearlescent radiation, then returned to normal. At least it would have been normal had the voice not been speaking in English.

"Teo, are you insane?" she hissed at the driver's body. "Get out of him! You know the procedure. You're only supposed to skinride when we have no other choice."

"Ay, *cabron!*" the spirit in young man's flesh answered. "You know what your problem is, Eileen? You never have any fun on these assignments. Sometimes I think you were born with a magnifying glass in your hand like that Derlock Domes guy."

The cab had pulled up to the front of the black tower. Eileen opened the door and told her partner to open the trunk so she could retrieve her two leather satchels. "That's *Sherlock Holmes*. Mr. Garcia," she said as she hauled the bags from the trunk. "Derlock Domes was the character played by Daffy Duck in an old Warner Brothers cartoon."

The spirit inside the taxi driver grinned at her. "Really? I loved that cartoon—that's the one in London with the Shropshire Slasher...."

She slammed the trunk shut and reached inside her purse to pull out her wallet. "Never mind that, Teo. Get out of that man. *Now!*"

The cabbie's face wrinkled up in a pout and looked as if it was about to say something else, then stopped, looking at the wallet in Eileen's hand. "Don't bother with the fare," he said. "I'm afraid our friendly, local cab driver took the naïve *gringa* the long way here from the airport. I'm just going to leave the impression in his head that you've paid. Let him explain the missing money to his boss tonight."

Eileen looked at the meter in the front of the cab. "No, Teo. It might be fun for you, but it's not really worth it. We don't want to draw any unnecessary attention." She looked around at the passing strangers. "We're not universally loved down here." She dropped

the exact amount of the fare on the front seat next to the cabby. "Of course, that doesn't mean I'm giving him a tip."

The eyes glowed silver for a moment, and the face became puzzled.

"Thank you for the ride, señor." Eileen said.

The young cabby stared at her, trying in vain to figure out where the last few minutes had gone. Finally he gave the Orpheus agent a wan smile and a wave. "Gracias, señora. Please enjoy your stay in Guadalajara."

As the cab pulled away from the curb, Eileen leaned back and looked up at the immense glass slab. The late afternoon sun gleaming off the dark panel was dazzling. Then a movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and the air next to her seemed to congeal. A translucent phantom of cobwebs and silver threads coalesced into a skinny, dark-skinned boy who looked no more than sixteen or seventeen.

"That is one big building," Teo said, a grin splitting his face.

Eileen saw a few passersby do double takes. Several scratched their heads in confusion as their rational minds tried to convince them that what their eyes had just witnessed was impossible, that boys didn't just appear like that. One or two even clutched at the silver crucifixes draped around their necks. Then, as often happened when reality clashed with preconceived notions, they decided to ignore it all. Their eyes glazed over as selective memory reweave the thread of their comfortable illusions.

Nothing to see here, Eileen thought. Just keep moving.

"Carajo, Señora Savitch! I thought the central office was sending down professionals!" The voice came from a thin man walking out of the building's large glass doors. He was wearing what appeared to be at least a three-thousand-dollar suit.

"And you would be?" Eileen said once the man was in front of her.

"Jose Cardinale," he replied. "Director-general of Orpheus Group S.A. here in Guadalajara."

"Really?" Teo said, his eyes glittering. "I wouldn't announce that too loudly if I were you. Eileen says we're not well liked down here."

"We're not," the man hissed, "and *pendejos* like you who don't take this job seriously do not help. What were you thinking, manifesting in the middle of the street?"

Eileen could feel the anger building in her protégé. "That's my fault, Señor Cardinale," she said. "This is Teo's first assignment. As his trainer, I occasionally give him too much leeway."

"Well, that stops right now!" Jose glared at Teo, whose predatory grin had never wavered. "*Dios Mio*, if you heard what the Pope said about Orpheus last week... and tomorrow is Day of the Dead! All we need is one public incident and we'll be finished." He waved for the two agents to follow him.

"I'm afraid we've only got a skeleton staff here at the moment," he said. Teo looked like he wanted to make a joke, but a look from Eileen cut him off. "The entire building is ours, but most of the floors aren't furnished or equipped yet. We haven't even put our logo on the door." The trio entered the marbled lobby. "In fact, we weren't really ready to begin operations when this situation came up."

The building was as ugly on the inside as it was on the outside. The walls were covered with gold-threaded mirrors and the floor was tiled in black-veined white marble. A large digital clock over the reception desk gave the time as 5:30 p.m. The foyer was empty save for a few people exiting from a large bank of elevators, headed toward the door. Eileen guessed they were Orpheus employees—they shuffled across the floor in the uncomfortable silence that she knew so well from Orpheus HQ in the States. Their faces bore the haunted

looks of people who knew more than they really should about how the universe worked.

"I don't want you to worry, though," Cardinale continued. "We've been trained in all operational procedures. I've had a temporary secure area outfitted for your use. A med staff is also available." The man's relentlessly chirpy voice sounded shrill and tiny in the vast foyer.

"The home office faxed down the way I like my nursery stocked?" Eileen asked.

Cardinale nodded, and they stepped into the wood-paneled elevator. He pressed "14" and the doors slid closed. There was a brief pause, and the floor lurched when the car began to rise.

"Then, can you please tell us what's going on?" she asked. "The email you sent just said 'Need experienced, Spanish speaking agents in Guadalajara ASAP.' You sent it with an A1A classification. That's a disaster call."

The thin man nodded. "I'm afraid that this client requires special consideration. She'd prefer that no details of her situation get out. As director-general, I'm honor bound to respect her wishes. After you finish the job I will, of course, make a full report."

Bullshit, you pompous windbag, she thought. Get out to who? Corporate? They're so tight-lipped, they need authorization in triplicate before they'll tell you your ass is on fire. Using that code was a mistake. Something's got you spooked, something you don't want anyone—especially not Corporate—to know about.

The elevator door opened, and Eileen and Teo followed the bureaucrat down a long hall filled with blank doorways. Finally, he reached one indistinguishable from all the others and pushed it open. Inside a plain but comfortable waiting area, a middle-aged woman was placing a tea tray on a low table. Two other women sat on a plush leather couch. The older of the two was heavy, but bore the remnants of what was once

a regal aristocratic beauty. The young woman seated next to her was a stunner, with lustrous black hair and smooth, golden skin. Both had on expensive tailored suits in different colors but of a similar cut. The younger woman also wore a beautiful set of dangling earrings made of some type of blue feathers.

As the three Orpheus employees entered, both women rose from the couch, smoothed down their skirts with identical hand motions, and stepped forward.

"Agents, may I present our clients, Laura Arguelles and her daughter, Zoia," Cardinale said. "Señora and Señorita Arguelles, these are two of our finest agents from *los Estados Unidos*, Eileen Savitch and Eleuterio Garcia."

"Teo, please," the young skinrider said as the four shook hands.

"Señora Torriente, if you'll excuse us," Cardinale said to his middle-aged receptionist, who nodded and retreated behind her desk. He then turned his attention to encompass the Orpheus agents and the Arguelles women. "Please, follow me to my office."

The administrator's office was, like the rest of the facility, pleasant and comfortable, but somehow anonymous. Eileen noted that there seemed to be nothing personal on the desk, no pictures or knickknacks of any kind. Clients and agents all quickly took their seats as Cardinale settled himself behind his desk.

"All right, then," Eileen said. "Can you please tell me what's going on?"

Laura Arguelles took a deep breath. "I believe my late husband is trying to destroy my family's construction company."

"What makes you think that?" Teo asked.

Wrong tonality, Eileen thought, *too confrontational*. She made a mental note to get him to work on his people skills at some point.

"He told me," Laura replied. Her expression was slightly aghast, as though her integrity had never been questioned before. "His spirit appeared to me several days ago."

"*Un momento, por favor*," Eileen interrupted. "What my colleague is trying to say is that while we certainly believe that you saw your husband, we need to get a bit of background on your situation first. That helps us first eliminate the possibility someone is perpetrating a fraud or hoax on you. It also lets us figure out how best to deal with your situation."

The older woman relaxed a bit. "*Seguro*," she said. "I suppose we can start at the beginning. My family's construction company, Tierra Arguelles, is one of the largest and most respected firms in Mexico. We have projects of various sizes under way all over the country, including this building." She threw a meaningful glance at Cardinale. "Unfortunately, we have run into a serious problem with the Benito Juarez, a convention center we are building here in Guadalajara."

Eileen uttered a small sound of acknowledgement, enough to prompt Laura Arguelles to continue.

"Please understand that my firm is used to dealing with difficult projects," the Mexican matron said. "We've built in areas infested by rebels and in jungles. We've faced earthquakes and suffered the vagaries of corrupt Mexican politics. Much of that is merely the cost of doing business, but the Juarez Center seemed cursed from the day we won the contract."

Laura's daughter interjected, "Please, Mother, don't use the word 'cursed.' You know it makes us sound so—primitive and superstitious."

The older woman glared at Zoia. "Despite everything that's happened, my daughter still doesn't believe in ghosts. Truth to tell, until Francisco came to me, I didn't believe in them either."

Eileen glanced at her dead companion. She could see the effort it took Teo not to make a smart remark,

and felt a small surge of pride when he successfully restrained himself. "So you were saying that the Juarez Center seemed cursed?" she prompted.

"Yes," Laura replied. "Even during the bidding process, Juarez was an unpopular project. Mexico's housing regulations being what they are, most of the homes in the *barrios* are illegal, without any clear chain of title, and thus, they become magnets for drugs and crime. The convention center is only the beginning of an urban renewal project that will revitalize the area."

"And make you tremendous profits," Teo said.

Laura's eyes burned a hole in the air between them. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Eileen put a restraining hand on Teo's arm. "Please, go on," she said.

"Unfortunately, this also means forcibly evicting thousands of residents and claiming land that the poor believe belongs to them. As you can imagine, left-wing groups, the radical press, activists, and even Amnesty International have weighed in against this project. Then we had our internal difficulties...."

"Which were?" Eileen asked.

Laura sat silently for a moment, as if weighing something over in her mind, then she shrugged and continued. "I don't particularly enjoy discussing family matters with outsiders, but I assume that you are bound by the same nondisclosure agreement as Señor Cardinale?"

"They are," the administrator said.

"Very well, then. This all starts many years ago when I was a young woman, about Zoia's age actually. I was a foolish girl who met a handsome stranger on vacation in Greece. He was charming, well mannered, finely dressed and came from one of the most respected winemaking families in Northern California. In time we fell in love, got married, and had a child, and I began working in my father's construction business."

"Then what happened?" Eileen asked.

"What often happens when a gold-digging man with a beautiful face and no marketable skills marries a wealthy woman—he became a ne'er-do-well. I fought it for a while, tried to help him settle his life, even gave him a meaningless make-work job in Tierra Arguelles' public relations department. That's when he turned on me."

"I beg your pardon?" Teo asked.

"He turned on me!" Laura spat. "He took that PR job and became the public face of the corporation. While I did the books and ran day-to-day operations and made sure thousands of people—including him—got a paycheck, he was gorging himself on fine lunches, getting his face on the cover of *Time* magazine and ingratiating himself with my father. When Papa was dying, he made that worm CEO of the company—he gave him my job!"

Zoia put her hand on her mother's knee. "To be fair," she said, "my father was rather good at what he did. He may not have had a head for business but he looked good, was a dynamic public speaker and had a real flair for public relations. Despite their disagreements, they were a good team for fifteen years."

"We were *never* a team," Laura said. "We were at *war*. We warred for the soul of my company. Every time he tried to interfere in actual operations he nearly cost us everything. I had to keep him down, keep him in the box. If he had his way, we never would have taken the Juarez job."

"I'm afraid that the Juarez Center was what sent both my parents over the edge," Zoia said. "Tierra Arguelles has been badly overextended for the past few years. The center would give us some badly needed capital at the cost of some very negative press. My mother, as Chief Operating Officer, wanted to take the job. My father, as CEO, overruled her."

Eileen leaned forward. "Couldn't you have done something? Appealed to the board?"

"The board?" Laura snorted. "Those sycophants have been in my husband's pocket for years. No, Francisco saw his chance to ruin me and he was going to take it."

Zoia remained curiously dispassionate. "The problem was, in the mind's of the public, of our business partners, and even of the government, Francisco Arguelles *was* Tierra Arguelles. He had even taken Mother's name when he married her. The only thing that saved her was his death six months ago. After that, Mother became CEO and we took the Juarez Center job."

"Tell me," Eileen asked, already suspecting the answer, "how exactly did your husband die?"

"The doctors weren't able to find a cause," Zoia said. "They thought it might be some type of bacteria that shut down his system. It was very quick, only three months."

"No autopsy?" Eileen asked.

"Of course not," Laura said. "I paid a great deal of money to have my husband killed. I certainly wasn't going to let some coroner ruin that."

"Mother!"

"Please, Zoia—these people are being paid a great deal of money for their discretion. If they need to know the truth to put your father back down into the hell where he belongs, then let's give them the truth. Deal with the reality, girl, and be ruthless. Have I taught you nothing?"

Eileen tried to calm things down. "I understand, Señora Arguelles. Of course we'll keep this information to ourselves. Thank you for being honest, though. It gives us some insight into your husband's motivation for returning. What happened next?"

Laura said, "The problems at the Juarez site started almost immediately. There have been a number of bizarre accidents. A brand-new girder succumbed to metal fatigue and nearly dropped a ceiling on a crew. A

circular saw went out of control and badly injured two workers. Things got moved around at night, destroyed. At first we thought it was Tianquiztli....”

“Tianquiztli?” Eileen asked.

“Tianquiztli is a Marxist group from the University of Guadalajara. They’ve been the most vocal opponents of the project. There have been a group of them behind the police barricades almost every day shouting about how we’re destroying a historical neighborhood and gutting our heritage.”

“What specifically are they referring to?”

Laura was dismissive. “There’s an abandoned church among the buildings we’re tearing down. We’ve had the Landmarks Commission and a team of researchers and archaeologists look into the church’s history—it’s neither significant nor valuable, it’s just old. They’re just a bunch of anti-progress lunatics.”

“And there’s no possibility these lunatics are behind these disturbances?”

“No. We’ve had trouble with environmental protestors sabotaging sites before. That’s why we hire very good and very expensive security for a job like this.”

“And you’re sure—?” Teo began.

“Of course, we’re sure!” Laura barked. “Do you think we automatically assume there’s a ghost involved every time we have an accident? We’ve investigated every possibility. But employees have reported tools moving on their own and being twisted into a useless mess when no one is touching them. Horrible apparitions are blocking access to key areas of the site. *That’s* why we started thinking about ghosts!”

There was a moment of thick silence.

Laura refocused on Eileen. “I learned about Orpheus from working on this building, and I thought that perhaps... Well, between the accidents and the Juarez site’s reputation, it’s getting harder and more expensive to keep workers there. Forget the damage to our

profits, if we can't get back on schedule our company is finished."

"And you said your husband appeared to you a few days ago...."

Laura nodded. "It was just a few minutes after midnight. I had just gotten into bed when I smelled my husband's cologne. I haven't smelled that odor in over a year, but believe me, I could never forget it. Then I felt a strong touch on my arm. I turned over and... and..." Fat, glistening tears appeared at the corners of her eyes.

"You saw your husband?" Teo prompted.

Laura nodded. "I... I... didn't know it at first because when I looked at him..." She began to cry—wet, snotty sniffles coming from her nose. "His face... for a moment *he didn't have a face*. Then it was like his flesh rolled down over his rotted skull because he was staring down at me, more beautiful than I remember." She buried her face in her hands.

Eileen looked at Zoia. "Did your mother tell you if your father said anything?"

Zoia nodded. "All he said was 'Soon, my love. Soon.'"

With the interview concluded, the three Orpheus employees sat alone in Cardinale's office.

"So?" the thin Mexican asked.

"It sounds legitimate," Eileen said. "We'll need to do some investigating, of course. I wouldn't expect Señora Arguelles to be able to give us much more in the way of specifics, but it sounds like a fairly standard haunting." She paused. "None of which explains why you needed to pull us down here right away."

Cardinale gave a nervous laugh. "Isn't it obvious? The woman who's in charge of completing our building is being haunted. We need to do everything in our power to help her."

"That's not even half of it, is it, Cardinale?" Eileen asked.

"I... I don't know what you mean."

"Please, Mr. Director-General, don't insult me. You sent that email with an A1A. This isn't any kind of mercy mission. It's not even about the building. I don't care how much specialized construction an Orpheus facility needs, you can't tell me there isn't another firm in Mexico able to handle the job if Tierra Arguelles goes under."

"Listen," Cardinale whispered, "you have no idea the kind of political weight a woman like Señora Arguelles has here. Laura Arguelles can make sure I never get into another government office."

"If Tierra Arguelles goes down, all of her political clout goes with her. That wouldn't affect Orpheus...." It was like a bell had gone off. "But it might affect *you*."

The small bureaucrat said nothing.

"Of course," Eileen said. "Exactly how much of this building's construction funds went directly into your pocket, Señor Cardinale? How many agents are you going to put at risk because of it?"

The tiny man waved his arms in a feeble protest. "No, no. That's ridiculous."

Eileen let out a long, low whistle. "Fine, Mr. Director-General of Orpheus Group S.A. It seems you were right to call us in. You're hip deep in it, now aren't you?"

"Please," the director said in a pained voice. "I need your help. I wasn't lying about Señora Arguelles' political clout. If she goes down, I go down, and the resulting publicity won't do Orpheus much good."

It was Eileen's turn to smile. "Relax, Señor Cardinale. We're going to help you—for triple time, plus bonus."

The man's face turned several shades of red. "What!" he yelled. "Triple time! Are you insane?"

Eileen was unmoved. "Come on, Señor Cardinale. What have you got to lose? If we fail, you're finished. If we succeed, it's a bargain. What do you say?"

He said nothing for several moments. "What do you need from me?" he finally hissed.

"Just show us the way to my nursery," Eileen said.

Cardinale gestured at the door in the corner of his office. "Under that paint is a steel door I had installed with an electronic security code. Behind it is the temporary nursery we had fixed to your specifications. Only the med-techs, the two of you and myself will have the code." He rattled off a string of numbers. "I understand that you skimmers can get somewhat nervous if your bodies aren't under lock and key."

His tone was dismissive. Eileen thought of telling him of the dangers that agents like her faced, of returning to find that *something* had moved into abandoned meat, of the agonizing spiritual death, of the things that floated around him even now. Instead she decided to show him.

"Teo," she said. "Could you show Señor Cardinale just how seriously I take the protection of my body?"

With a wolfish grin the young man stood and approached the Mexican bureaucrat.

"What are you doing?" Cardinale said, pushing his wheeled office chair back. Teo strode forward, stepping *through* the desk and grabbing the officious man by his collar. Teo then lifted up his hand and pointed his right index and middle finger directly at Cardinale's collar.

"This is going to hurt—a lot." Both fingers seemed to melt, losing consistency and oozing into a new form. Jose barely had time to register the deadly looking silvery spikes at the ends of Teo's fingers before they were rammed directly into his forehead.

The spikes did no physical damage, but Eileen could see the man jerk and writhe as he fought the presence shoving its way into his mind. Then Teo was gone and only the body of the administrator sat there, his eyes tinted with a silvery sheen.

"Let him hear me," Eileen said. Cardinale's body nodded. "What you feel crawling around in your tiny

little head is my partner, Señor Cardinale. If anything—*anything*—happens to my body, we're going to return here and Teo is going to do this again. Then what he's going to make you do to yourself will have you yearning for something so minor as disgrace and jail time. Are we clear?"

The head nodded up and down.

"I said are we clear!" The head nodded even faster this time. Suddenly, the eyes flashed silver and Teo stood in front of Cardinale. The administrator's body slumped as if he were a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Good then," Eileen said. "I'll retire to my nursery. When I return, we're going to check out the construction site. I'll keep you updated on our progress." With that, the two agents exited through the security door.

At least he got something right, she thought as she walked into the small apartment. As promised, the nursery was decorated and stocked according to her specifications: soft lighting, a comfortable bed, a television, a decent stereo system, a selection of Brahms on CD, a small refrigerator stocked with sodas and chocolate bars for when she returned to her body.

Despite the surface comfort, Eileen hated nurseries. She closed the door, her heart beginning to pound, then popped in the CD. The bed was cold and the mattress felt hard when she sat down on it cross-legged. Moving into the first *prana* position, she forced her mind into the yogic trance that allowed her—in Orpheus parlance—to skim. Yet the trance brought no peace. Rather she was ruthlessly clamping down on her autonomic functions, wrestling with her biological responses. She could feel the flesh fighting her, agonizing as she pushed herself to the edge of life—concentrating on the thin, glowing cord that represented her soul. Gradually her breathing and heart rate slowed... slowed... slowed...

Then, at precisely the right instant, she sent a mental command and her body died. She relived it, as she did every time:

"Shouldn't he be in a car seat?"

"Do you want him crying the whole way? My mother's is less than two miles and he's hungry."

The sensation of Nicholas at her breast, the soft lips on her nipple. The hormones flowing as he begins to suckle.

Searing pain shot through her nonexistent skull while she tore herself away from her own body.

The screech of iron, glass cracking—shattering. Pain as tiny, immature teeth clamp down and then blackness—sweet oblivion.

A splitting, ripping sensation strikes, as though her chest were bursting open

And light as she returns. Something warm and sticky and sweet is dripping into her mouth. Nicholas is in her arms and he's so small, so still.

"Nicholas? Nicholas, honey? Nicholas...?"

"Nicholas!" she screamed. Other skimmers she knew claimed that they enjoyed the process of freeing themselves from the skinsuit. Eileen could only envy them.

It took a moment to adjust herself to the different perspective that being a spirit brought with it. Everything around her seemed wavy—slightly off and oddly angled as though she was somehow seeing the three-dimensional world tilted 90-degrees to the rest of reality. Things danced at the corner of her eye, ugly things, things that wouldn't be there if she turned her head to face them. She had learned to ignore them.

She checked her body and grunted with satisfaction as she noted its slow regular breathing and wide staring eyes. Then she opened the door and stepped back into the office, not bothering to manifest to Cardinale.

"What are we going to do now?" Teo asked.

"The Arguelles want to meet us tomorrow at the site for an official tour," Eileen said. "Tonight I want to do some reconnaissance in the area. The dead may have seen something that the living haven't."

Teo jerked his thumb at Cardinale. "And this guy?" The nervous man was staring back and forth between Teo and his invisible companion. "You're not going to just trust this guy and let him off the hook, are you?"

"He's going to be a good boy." She drifted behind the man and let her voice slide into his ear. "Won't you be a good boy, Señor Cardinale?" The administrator jumped, looking for the hissing voice. When he realized what it was, he gulped and nodded.

"I'm going to trust him because, after this is over, you and I are going to have this very wealthy man in our hip pocket," she said, so only Teo could hear.

Teo dematerialized and the two agents drifted from the room, floating silently past the receptionist and riding the elevator to the ground floor. As they passed through the lobby, Eileen looked into the mirrored wall. She appeared as she always did, a disembodied spirit wearing a diaphanous white gown that flowed over her feet, giving her the appearance that she was floating on air. Of course, what drew her attention was the stain that she couldn't hide: the dripping blood that flowed down the front of the gown from her right breast.

She watched the wine-red stain. She was about to aid a murdering businesswoman and an embezzling manager, all for money and whatever perks Cardinale would owe her. *What would Thomas think?* A phantasmal drop of blood fell from her breast to the floor.

"First field mission," she said, trying to shake off her morose thoughts. "Are you ready for this?" Teo was the only person who had never asked about the stain, though, and that was another reason she loved working with him.

The young ghost looked deeply into the older agent's eyes. "I've been ready for this since the day you found me. I'll make you proud. "

"I know you will."

The Mexican sky was dark and cold as they exited the building, and the yawning emptiness burned with a million uncaring stars. The tall buildings threw long shadows, deep black valleys that drowned any light that flowed into them. Most startling to Eileen's dead eyes, though, were the decorations. At first glance, she thought the entire city had taken on a festive air. Strung between the high towers and running all through the streets were banners, ropes and ghostly hangings in bright colors. Spectral skeletons with ornate designs carved into their bones hung from ropes and chattered their teeth at her. Ghostly flowers lined the boulevard, the memories of their powerful fragrances filling the air, and everywhere she turned, distant mariachi music sounded. The melodies were both vibrant and sad, echoes of lost love, madness and suicide.

Yet, as she walked down the street toward the center of the city, Eileen found that the decorations did not fill her with joy. Rather, they generated an almost infinite sadness, faded memories of a life more painful than mere oblivion. Around her and Teo the dead walked, more ghosts in one place than she had ever seen in a lifetime. All of them seemed oblivious to the agents' presence, hurrying hither and yon on mysterious errands.

The two agents turned the corner, coming to a large open plaza surrounded on several sides by impressive structures built of massive brown stones. Throngs of the dead clustered in small groups around the entrance to a large church with two high steeples, their eyes filled with longing, searching the faces of the congregants as they entered. Once in a while, one of the dead would recognize some of the living and follow them inside, desperately trying to get their attention.

With enormous effort, Eileen shifted her perceptions completely back to the living world, shutting out the restless dead. As she had suspected, the music was coming from a parade of marchers in colorful costumes. The walkers, dressed as merrymaking skeletons, stilt-walking ghosts, crows and Aztec warriors wielding Styrofoam swords, mingled with the crowds of dead. The ghosts seemed to take sustenance from the joy and laughter that followed the marchers.

"Día de los Muertos," Teo said. "The Day of the Dead festival. I remember a parade like this one, once. It's one of my few good memories of this third-world toilet of a country."

Eileen was startled at the bitterness in his voice.

"My mother..." Oozing cracks appeared on his face. "This country is why my sister and I lay under a tarp for sixteen hours in 120 degree heat to make it to San Diego. If there wasn't such a shortage of agents who spoke Spanish, I'd never have come back here."

"I could have handled this alone," Eileen said. "You didn't have to come."

Teo's face was unreadable. "I guess I like my job too much."

Eileen almost laughed. "No, Teo. Be honest with me if no one else."

His eyes were blazing now and the fissures bled freely. "Look at them!" he said, ignoring her question and pointing at the colorful denizens of Guadalajara. "Tomorrow is Día de los Muertos—Day of the Dead. Under those colorful displays, candy skulls and grinning masks are lives filled with misery, despair and fear. Once a year they organize this sad little comedy to hide the truth from themselves—that the fear of death rules over their entire lives."

"And we're different, I suppose?"

"Of course we are! Look at us—we wear the meat when we have to, but then we cast that thing off and walk among the spirits. What fear does death have for

us? We already know what lies on the other side. There are no mysteries left for us, and therefore, no fear. We don't need anyone."

Eileen slowly shook her head. "More things in Heaven and Earth," she muttered.

"I'm sorry?" Teo said, "I didn't catch that."

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," she said. "That's from Hamlet. Act one, when Hamlet and Horatio confront the ghost of Hamlet's father."

Teo's voice was soft, and the wounds on his face were beginning to close. "If they'd had an Orpheus agent, he would have put that father back in the ground where he belonged. Besides, I always thought Shakespeare was an overrated gringo anyway."

Eileen placed her hand on Teo's shoulder for the briefest instant. He shook it off. "All right," Teo said. "You wanted to speak with some of the dead of Guadalajara, where do you want to start?"

Eileen shook her head. "Not here. We need to get down to the construction site. I'm hoping someone there will know something about Francisco."

"Then how do you suggest we get down there? The Juarez Center is all the way down in the Posada. That's a very long walk and I'm not even sure I know the way."

"Perhaps I can help, *mis amigos*?" The speaker stood at the edge of the sidewalk, casually leaning against the side of a burro-drawn hearse festooned with flowers. He wore an elegant black suit trimmed with elaborate gold braid. A sombrero tied around his neck hung down his back. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and he stared at the two of them, grinning.

Not that he can help grinning and staring, Eileen thought. The man had no flesh at all save for his suit—he was merely a skeleton. He wasn't the standard skeleton, however. Even Eileen, with her minimal knowledge of biology, could tell that these bones had never been human. Rather, they were stylized, with a

square skull and bones that joined at softly rounded edges, the way a child might create a skeleton out of papier-mâché. Subtle patterns of green, red and gold had been carved into the creature's forehead, around the eye sockets and along the jaw.

"You're a *calavera*!" Teo said.

The skeleton in the suit stood tall and gave them an almost mocking bow. "Marco Calavera, to be precise. Transporter of the dead."

Teo shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I mean you're a *calavera*, one of the decorative skeletons that people put up on *Día de los Muertos*."

Marco laughed. "You're not from Guadalajara, are you?"

"No," Eileen replied slowly. "We're from the United States"

"Ah, I see! How did two Anglo ghosts get all the way down here?"

"That's none of your business," Teo said.

Marco held up one hand. "As you wish *mis amigos*. Do you wish to go somewhere?"

Teo pointed to the hearse. "You mean you'll take us in that, safely?"

"Of course," Marco said. "That's what I do. As long as you ride in my hearse, no harm will come to you."

"We'd like to go to where they're building the new convention center."

The set of the skeleton's shoulders dropped subtly. "Please, señor, you don't want to go down there. There are so many other interesting things to see in Guadalajara. I could show you the Teatro Degollado or the—"

Teo cut him off. "We need to get down to the Tierra Arguelles site. Will you take us there or not?"

The skeleton sighed, "Of course I'll take you there. I can't refuse to take anyone anywhere." He gave a brief, resigned shrug. "Not anymore."

Eileen leaned over and whispered into Teo's ear. "Teo, who is he? You're being awfully trusting all of a sudden."

"He's a *calavera*, Eileen. He does in death something that he failed to do in life, trying to atone for not living up to some duty. If Marco promises to transport us to the Posada safely and without incident, he'll do it." He shrugged his shoulders. "Either this or we walk."

Gesturing to the two agents to sit on the coffin, the skeleton in the suit climbed up into the driver's seat, cracked his whip and shocked his two translucent donkeys into motion. The hearse, unbound by the physical laws that tied down the living, zipped with surprising speed through the city's streets.

As the agents and their strange driver left the prosperous enclave of the Zona Rosa, the character of the city changed. The decorations continued, both the living and the dead preparing for the festival that was set to begin at midnight. Yet, in the lower-middle-class residential zone, the brightly colored paper flowers, fragile skeletons and occasional piñatas hung by the living, couldn't hide the cracks in the graffiti-covered walls, or the mud-splattered children walking the streets.

The dead, too, changed. Where before they had seemed merely desperate and sad, now their need was colored by anger, and in some cases, hate. The ghostly hangings had become more ragged and windblown, even the memory of joy and life washed from them. Religious icons became more frequent. Bloody, anatomically correct crucifixes and statues of a black-robed Madonna adorned every wall and decorated the occasional fountain. The worst though, from Eileen's perspective, were the child-sized ghosts who stared hungrily at windows lit from within by candles.

"Who are they?" Eileen asked.

"The *Angelitos*," their skeletal driver said, turning to face Eileen. "We must have faith that even these lost souls will come to know the love of the Great Mother."

He absently rubbed a bony hand over a small medallion hanging around his neck. Eileen noticed it for the first time. It was circular and bore the image of a robed woman, her arms outstretched as if to embrace the world.

Eileen had never seen an effigy of the Virgin quite like it. A chill passed over her, a momentary image of a squid-like beast swimming under the waves where light and warmth never came. She glanced again at the medallion around his neck and noted that the woman's hood was pulled far forward, completely obscuring her face, and the sleeves of the robe covered her hands. Indeed, were it not for the outline of breasts, she might not have known the robed figure was a woman at all.

"*¿Ayuda me, por favor?*" The voice was soft and meek. It belonged to a small woman who stood staring at them in the middle of the street. The spirit was dressed in a loose-fitting, white top and brightly colored, flowing skirt. Flowers were woven in her hair, and her milky eyes stared straight ahead. In her arms she carried a baby, its head turned away from them, resting against her breast. The only things that marred her lovely image were the tiny, powder-stained hole in one temple and the large ragged hole in the back of her head.

"*¿Ayuda a mi bebe?*" the spirit asked again, and held the infant ghost toward them.

"She's blocking the road," the skeleton said.

"Can't you just go around her?" Teo asked.

"She'll just move. I've seen this before. Unless we want to wait, someone will have to answer her."

"Answer her? What do you..." he trailed off as he noticed that Eileen was climbing off the hearse.

"Eileen, wait!"

"Your baby needs help?" Eileen asked, slowly approaching the strange woman.

The tiny spirit's gaze shifted direction, though it was difficult to tell through her cloudy orbs whether

she was actually seeing them. “Ayuda a tu bebe...” she whispered, then opened her mouth widely and sang:

*Ya me canso de llorar y no amanece
Ya no sé si maldecirte o por tí rezar.
Tengo miedo de buscarte y de encontrarte
Donde me aseguran mis amigos que te vas.*

The tiny figure in her arms shifted, turning its head to face the Orpheus agent. “Mama?” the tremulous voice came from baby.

Eileen’s face was slack as she stared at the ghostly infant. “Nicholas?” She whispered.

The spirit smiled at her. “Si, Nicholas,” she said and held the tiny figure out to the agent.

Teo was scrambling off the hearse. “Eileen, no! It’s a trick!”

“Nicholas!” the ghost with the baby shrieked. Her hair began waving on its own and her mouth opened wider than any human’s ever could, revealing a row of jagged teeth. The thing in her arms lost its human appearance, becoming a bloated, child-like corpse with dead black eyes, a distended belly and a round lamprey-like orifice in the middle of its face. Then, with little warning, the ghost threw the tiny spirit at Eileen.

“Teo!” Eileen yelled, trying to leap backwards. Reflexively she threw her hands out as the tiny figure landed at her feet and began clawing its way up her leg.

The shrieking of the ghostly infant filled the square as the tiny thing’s black eyes bored into Eileen’s own. “Nicholas!” the spectral woman yelled, the words mangled in the inhuman shape of her jaw. Eileen desperately tried to push the infant-shaped thing off her as it continued to crawl up her body, the hideous mouthparts pulsating obscenely. The maternal ghost rocketed forward, nails grown to glittering knives....

Only to meet with Teo Garcia’s rock-hard fists. The young skinrider looked nothing like the affable seven-

teen-year old spirit Eileen had arrived in the city with. His hands had fused into what looked like a solid mass of bone. Open crevices in his face dripped a noxious black fluid and sharp spikes sprang from his elbows. He threw himself onto the small spirit in a fury of fists and hate. There was a sodden thump when his fist impacted the side of the creature's head, and suddenly she was just a sad-faced girl again, scrambling off into the darkness.

Eileen was struggling while the thing in her arms thrust itself forward, trying to latch onto her neck. She couldn't get the baby-creature to let go. She gasped as its claws tore into her ghostly flesh. Then, just as her strength gave out, two fists crashed together, popping the creature's head like a rotten fruit.

"Oh, God," Eileen gasped as the child-shape dropped off her body. "What is it?"

"She is one of the Palomas Negras," the skeletal driver said, "and her child is a *niño perdido*."

A lost boy, Eileen translated. *Where have I heard that before?*

"And thanks for your help, Señor Calavera," Teo said bitterly. "What happened to getting us there without incident?" The wounds on his body were closing as he helped his mentor to her feet.

The skeleton shrugged. "I transport, señor. When you get off, you take your chances. Shall we continue?"

Teo looked to Eileen for guidance. Eileen was merely staring at the skeleton, almost as if she was waiting for some divine inspiration to tell her what to do. Her skin was punctured where the child-thing's nails had torn into her. She knew that back in her nursery, her physical body was sporting similar wounds and hoped that the medical staff on duty was competent.

"I'm fine, Teo. I think we'll be okay." Her protégé had reverted back to his normal seventeen-year-old appearance. Then, as she was about to say something,

else, they heard loud music come from a cantina on the corner.

*Solitaria camina la bikina
La gente se pone a murmurar
Dicen que tiene una pena
Dicen que tiene una pena
Que la hace llorar.*

The voice was heartbreaking, full of more anguish and loss than she thought she could bear.

"Now what?" Teo asked. He looked over at Calavera. "What's that?"

Although the driver was unable to change expression, Eileen thought she detected nervous energy coming from him.

"That is bad, señor," he said. "It is the voice of the Llarona—the crying woman. Do not listen. She brings you only lies and destruction."

*Altanera preciosa, y orgullosa
No permite la quieran consolar
Pasa luciendo su gran majestad
Pasa, camina, y los mira
Sin verlos jamás.*

Eileen listened closely, feeling the pain and anguish that came through the music. She felt a kindred spirit at the other end of that song.

"No, Teo," she said. "I think it's all right. Wait here."

"Eileen! You can't!" Teo said. "You got fooled the last time."

The senior agent took his hand for a moment. "Trust me," she whispered. "I was caught off guard last time. I think I have to do this."

The music created an almost visible trail to the swinging doors of the cantina. Eileen hesitated for just

a moment, and then walked through them. Inside, a group of rough locals sat at rude tables, staring down at the netted candles that guttered between them. Half-empty bottles filled with pale yellow liquor stood in front of most of them. Every few minutes, one of them would pour a splash into a dirty shot glass and slam it down. Not one of them looked up when she entered, nor seemed to notice the singing that filled the room:

*La bikina tiene pena y dolor
La bikina no conoce el amor*

The voice came from a hunched figure that sat alone at a darkened table in the center of the bar. No candle burned on the table, but a withered hand emerged from the old woman's shawl to grip a full bottle of tequila. An empty shot glass sat upside-down in front of the empty chair facing the crone. Eileen tried to get a look at the old wraith's face, but no light seemed to penetrate the shawl draped over her head. Only singing emerged:

*Por la calle camina la bikina
La gente se pone a murmurar
Dicen que alguien ya vino y se fue
Dicen que pasa la vida soñando con él.
Dicen que pasa la vida soñando con él.*

"Hola, Llarona." The voice came from the darkness under the shawl. It was as powerful as the singing had been, and despite herself, Eileen sat down at the table opposite the ghost.

"That's what the *calavera* called you," Eileen said. "Llarona."

"It is what we both are," the ghost replied. "Crying women. You are like me, though not so old."

"Banshee," Eileen said. "We call spirits of my type banshees."

The wizened figure shrugged. "Llarona, banshee, it is all the same. We bear the weight of the world's pain and we scream it to those who cannot hear and will not listen."

"Who are you? Why have you brought me here? I don't have..."

"You don't have time," the woman finished. There was the suggestion of a smile in her voice. "You are like me, so perhaps you know. Llaronas, we can sometimes see that which is to come, *si o no*?"

"Sometimes banshees can get glimpses of probable futures, yes, but mathematically speaking..."

"No!" the faceless woman barked. "We do not talk of numbers or science here. We talk only of beliefs and cultures."

Eileen sat silently, unsure of how to respond.

"I come to you now because you are hunted. I draw you here because there is a brief moment between now and the future when the course of the future may be changed, as a shifting pebble may steer the course of the avalanche."

Eileen glanced behind her, as if she expected the child-thing to come crawling in the door.

"Ah, la Paloma Negra and her child," the withered figure said. "Do not worry about them. You have driven off his first attempt. They will not return."

"Whose first attempt? Francisco Arguelles? Did he send that thing after us?"

A bitter laugh. "*Si*. Though you should not worry about him either. He is a pawn. No, you must worry about the thing from the deep that tracks you even now."

"What are you talking about? What thing?"

"I come to warn you, child. My song has shown what is to come—She is hunting you through her catspaws. Beware of them, but mostly beware of Her." Something in the Llarona's voice made Eileen tremble.

"Who is this 'she'?" she asked. "What do you know?"

"Know?" A gravelly laugh emerged from the depths of her shawl. "I know more than anyone should. I have looked deeper than anyone should ever go." The ghost leaned forward, her incredibly wrinkled face slowly emerging from the shadow of her cowl. Eileen drew in a nonexistent breath as she saw what had become of it.

"My eyes had seen too much," the ghost said, staring at Eileen from empty sockets surrounded by deep gouges where something had torn the orbs out. Great black tears flowed continually from the holes, burning smoking lines in the flesh of her face. "I pulled them out myself, to rid them of the image of the Mother of Nightmares, Coatlicue. Yet, such is her power that she is now all that I see." Despite herself, Eileen stared into the woman's empty eye sockets, seeing in them a pool of night deeper than she had ever imagined. Then, there, at the very bottom of the pool, she saw a hint, the merest reflection of a tentacled form, a portion of a tiny aspect of monster that made her want to run away screaming.

"So, you see a bit of what I see." the Llarona chuckled. "And then you know my anguish." The ghost reached and picked up the bottle of tequila, turning over the shot glass and pouring in a healthy splash. "But in knowledge, in vision, there is hope. There is hope in you, Eileen Savitch. Even in despair, your voice has not been stilled."

Softly, tenderly, the old ghost reached and stroked the Orpheus agent's hand. "Everything dies once, Eileen. Some, like you, die many times. But eventually we must all face the great mystery that comes with final death. That is not to be feared. The only thing to be feared is to die without accomplishing your purpose."

"What am I supposed to do?" Eileen's voice was barely audible.

"You will fail, Eileen Savitch. You will fail and you will die, as will all those you believed could not be defeated. Yet, in your failure lie the seeds of ultimate

success. Before you die you will meet one who knows more than he should, one who is many places at once. And if you tell this man what you know, you will change the course of the avalanche.”

“How do you know? How can you be sure?”

The old woman shrugged, downed the tequila and withdrew into the shadows of her scarf. “Who can say? As you pointed out, the future is always changing. I have pushed as much as I can. Now you must go.” She slammed the shot glass down on the table, there was a shattering sound....

Eileen stood outside the cantina. The building inside was dark and the music was gone.

“What happened?” Teo asked. “The lights went out just before you opened the door.

“I’m not sure,” Eileen said. “But I think we’ve got a much bigger problem than we thought.” She turned and retreated to the burro-drawn hearse.

“Take us to the Posada,” she said to the skeletal driver. “Do not stop until we get there. Teo, if Señor Calavera even looks like he’s about to slow down, take his head off.”

The young ghost nodded grimly.

Calavera flicked the reins and the phantom burros trotted forward. They proceeded in silence for an hour, passing through progressively poorer neighborhoods, filled with imposing industrial plants pouring out a rich brown haze. The factories and refineries were lit up, the graveyard shift manned by workers from ragged slums and illegal ramshackle homes, built on top of each other and butting up against the high fences. Though there was life of a sort here, the desperation and rage that came from both the living and the dead filled the air with an emotional pollution almost as powerful as the noxious vapors of the factories.

Finally, the *calavera* spoke up. “Señora, we’re approaching Posada.”

The Posada district was a burned-out shell, and the decorations and music, both ghostly and mortal, were long gone. Most of the leaning tenements' windows and doors were boarded up, many of them bearing yellow and black signs that read: EDIFICIO CLAUSURADO—¡NO PASAR! The buildings were constructed of any number of materials—wood, stone, stucco—all cobbled together with no set pattern. Walls leaned over them at crazy angles, and the streets became twisted. Every empty home sported shattered windows, their sharp edges glittering like teeth in the darkness, and all around them the smell of rot and decay loomed.

"I can see why they want to tear out this neighborhood," Eileen whispered. "It's a cancer."

Soft lights at the end of the street gradually resolved into the construction site. The area was surrounded by a twelve-foot-tall chain-link fence topped by razor wire. Temporary lights on poles attempted to illuminate the entire zone, highlighting huge bulldozers, cranes and wrecking balls, but the immediate effect was to make the resulting shadows even darker. Several buildings had already been knocked down, and moldy debris, rotted timbers and chunks of plaster littered the ground. Near the guard shack by the front gate, an enormous sign sported Tierra Arguelles' phoenix logo and some text:

FUTURA LOCALIDAD DEL CENTRO DE CONVENCIONES
BENITO JUAREZ.

UN FUTURO BRILLANTE PARA GUADALAJARA

Then, in smaller type:

NO PASAR. GUARDIAS ESTAN AUTORIZADOS A USAR
FUERZA FATAL.

"A brilliant future of deadly force. That's Mexico all right," Teo said.

The skeleton pulled the hearse to a stop and the two agents slowly stepped to the ground. "Here you are *mis amigos*," the driver said. "Are you sure you want to stay? This is a bad place."

Eileen turned and faced the driver. "Why is this a bad place? Do you know something about Francisco Arguelles?"

Although the face of the skeleton didn't—couldn't—change, Eileen suddenly got the impression that the grin had disappeared. "I wouldn't say that name too loudly, señora."

"Why? What do you know?"

Marco shrugged his shoulders. "Señora, there are things that even the dead should fear, fates worse than merely becoming a Paloma Negra, doomed to forever reenact the words of a mariachi."

"Is Francisco one of those things?" Eileen asked.

"The rumor mill grinds the dead too," the skeleton replied. "I don't know anything beyond what I've heard in the last few months—that there is a new movement among the spirits. Things have been seen and inoffensive ghosts that never bothered anyone have vanished without a trace. Look around you." Marco gestured to the empty streets. "No living—and no dead—reside here. Something in this place just sucks them up—you stay here long enough and you will be, as well."

"Thank you for your advice, Marco, but I think we'll stay."

The skeleton threw up his hands. "I tried, Señora. Buena suerte." A crack of the whip and the hearse was rattling off.

"Is it my imagination or is he traveling much faster to get out than he did getting us in?" Teo asked.

Eileen said nothing, merely turned to look at the large gate that fronted the construction zone. It was at least twenty feet wide, mounted on rollers that were apparently controlled from a small guard shack off to the side. There were also some smaller workers' entrances that were closed and locked with big, thick padlocks. Through the shack's tiny window she could see the still form of a man in tan staring at a small blue

light. Tinny laughter and the faint sound of music came from within; she recognized it as a Toyota commercial.

"So, what do you think? Should we interrupt our rent-a-cop's enjoyment of *Sabado Gigante* or just sneak onto the grounds?" Teo said.

Eileen shushed him, peering at the man in the shack. "Something's wrong here."

Teo indicated the burned out wreckage around them. "Eileen, everything's wrong here."

"That's not what I mean, Teo. We've been here for at least two minutes and I haven't seen that guard move once. And where's that expensive security Zoia Arguelles mentioned?"

Teo edged closer to the guard shack, trying to get a better look at the man. "You're right," he said. "He's not moving at all."

Eileen joined him and they moved toward the door. The immobile man had his back to them. He was leaning back in a reclining chair, watching a small television that was now broadcasting news coverage of the *Día de los Muertos* festivals. Next to the TV sat a multiline black phone, its red voicemail light blinking on and off.

Teo concentrated and Eileen saw his ghostly form flicker, disappear and then reappear as he manifested himself. "Hey, buddy," he said to the form in the chair.

The man never moved.

"Hey, pal! Couple of trespassers here want to talk to you." Teo reached over and shook the man on the shoulder. The movement caused the man's feet to fall off the small table and the chair to slowly swing around.

"Holy shit!" Teo yelled, surprise and shock reverting him to English.

The phoenix patch on the man's shirt was barely visible through the thick layer of blood that had cascaded over it. The blood had sprung from a variety of facial wounds, most of all an enormous gash in the man's neck. The deep cut had sliced his throat open

like a piece of veal, and under the gore, something small and pink was jutting out from the gash.

"My God," Eileen said. "What is that?"

Teo crossed himself. "It's his tongue. Whoever did this pushed it down the back of his throat and pulled it out through the cut. They call it a Colombian necktie."

"And the eyes?" The man's eyeballs had been removed with almost surgical precision. Someone had precisely sliced off the eyelid and scooped the eyes out of the Tierra Arguelles guard's head.

"I have no idea," Teo said. "That's a new one on me."

Eileen edged past the body and looked down at the phone. "He's got mail."

Teo pressed the button, and a loud beep emerged from the phone's speaker. A woman's voice filled the hut: "Ramon, it's Betty down in Dispatch. I just got a call that some bean counter is on another cost-cutting kick. I'm afraid the Unlimited Security contract has been canceled. There won't be any patrollers tonight. If any of those yahoos from the University show up, just lock the door and call the police. Be careful, *mijo*."

"So much for Zoia's 'expensive security,'" Eileen said, and then looked down at the corpse in the chair. "Sorry, Ramon."

There was a metallic rattle from inside the site.

"*Chingado!* They're still here," Teo said, and unmanifested. "What do we do?"

Eileen thought for a moment. "Let's go find them."

The young agent gave her a wolfish grin. "Excellent!"

"No, Teo," Eileen warned. "Follow my instructions. Whoever that is, we need them alive."

The two agents exited the shack. The small gate in the fence directly behind the hut was hanging open, the padlock laying on the ground. Past the fence, the most notable thing was an enormous church standing on the far side of the construction site, where demoli-

tion had yet to begin. The gothic edifice loomed over the ruined and demolished buildings, the tall lamppost behind it causing the pointed spire to cast a spear of darkness directly at the two agents.

"Whew," Teo whistled. "That is one *ugly* building—why would anyone want to save that?"

There was another rattle coming from an area where thousands of pieces of rebar and enormous copper pipes had been stacked in neat pyramids.

"Keep your voice down!" Eileen whispered.

"Excuse me?" Teo replied. "Eileen, nobody can hear us."

"GET OUT!" the voice sounded enormous and hollow, as though it was echoing from a far distance or...

"Teo!" Eileen hissed. "That pile of tubing. Can you get to the other side?"

"Give me two minutes." The young skinrider's legs became soft and viscous, then reconstituted, thicker and more muscular than before. Then he zoomed into the darkness and was gone.

"LEAVE THIS PLACE, EUROS! YOU DEFILE ITS SACRED SOIL WITH YOUR POLLUTED FEET!"

Eileen moved slowly to one side, closer and closer to the copper pipes. A moment later she was directly across from their open mouths. Dim light shone through the tubes from the other end, allowing her to get a vague glimpse of the other side.

All except one. A dark bulk was blocking the light in one of the tubes near the bottom of the stack. As she came closer to the pipe, she strained her eyes, trying to make out some details of the shape. It was hopeless. When she reached the mouth of the pipe, she knelt down.

She rubbed one hand in the blood that stained the front of her gown. It was like plunging her arm into an acid bath.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"A car seat—a lousy stinking car seat!"

Screams and grunts and curses from a man she loved.

"I can't... I can't deal with this... with you..."

"Thomas? Please. Where are you? Can't we work this out..."

Her hand came away from her chest covered in a sticky, viscous mess.

The smell of gunpowder. Echoes of a shot still vibrating the air molecules of the room. The accusing glare in the one eye that remained in his head. The eye she saw every night when she tried to sleep.

"DO NOT MAKE ME SHOW MY POWER!"

She saw a flash of movement on the other side of the pipes. Teo had moved into position.

"Teo, it's coming out—now!" With that she threw the congealed blood into the pipe.

Thomas. She used to think her soul would feel lighter when she did this. Somehow, though, there always seemed to be more blood.

"AAAGGHH! IT BURNS!" the voice continued to echo, though it no longer sounded so menacing. There was a blur of movement and Teo swooped down on the dark form that shot out of the pipe.

"I got it!" Teo yelled. "No, wait—her. I got her!"

Her? Eileen thought as she moved around the pile of copper in what passed for a run among the dead. When she reached the other side she saw her partner struggling with a mass of blue denim that, once Teo got her under control, resolved into an attractive young girl.

"Euro puta!" the girl spat. "Remove your filth from me." She had stopped trying to free herself from Teo's grip but was still wiping the bloody residue off her face.

"You can see me?" Eileen asked, knowing that she was still invisible.

"Of course I can see you, *puta*," the girl replied. Her face was drawn and thin. Dark circles shadowed her eyes and a thin dribble of spit trailed from one corner of her mouth. "The sacrament gives me the power to see the spirits—even spirits of evil like you!"

"Sacrament?" Eileen asked. What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I owe no explanations to *blanca* scum like you." Eileen looked closer at the girl. Her pupils were dilated and her face was filthy. She was wearing faded blue jeans and expensive work boots that looked as if they had never actually seen a day of hard work. A thin T-shirt bearing a picture of Che Guevara had been pulled over her spare frame, and a beat-up denim jacket sporting a number of buttons covered it.

Looking closer, Eileen saw some of the buttons had images—the faces of John Lennon and Fidel Castro, a striped rainbow, a black fist and a stepped pyramid. Other buttons had slogans including YANQUIGO HOME!, U.S. OUT OF NORTH AMERICA, INTERNATIONAL A.N.S.W.E.R., ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE and FOR THE RACE, EVERYTHING, OUTSIDE THE RACE, NOTHING! The other accessory she wore looked fresher—blood splashed over her clothes and hands, and not the dark jelly of Eileen's ghostly breast.

"*Blanca*?" Teo said, spinning the girl around and staring into her eyes. "You might want to look a little closer at me."

The girl's expression of hatred changed slightly, now modified with a tinge of disgust. "You're worse than the Euro! You are a bronze traitor, like La Malinche—Cortez's whore. Nothing but a lapdog for our oppressors."

"Do you have any idea what she's talking about?" Teo asked, turning the girl back around.

Eileen concentrated and let solidity wrap around her, congealing the spirit gauze of her ghostly body into something physical and real. She shoved her hands into the young woman's jacket and came out with a wallet, then felt around her waist and pulled out the ornate bronze dagger that had been shoved into her belt.

"I'll kill you, *ramera!*" the girl foamed. "That's mine! I have rights!"

"Tell it to *la policia*," Eileen said, examining the items she had retrieved from the girl. The dagger was a beautiful piece, sharp and deadly looking, with an elaborately carved handle that made it resemble an open-mouthed jaguar.

"Does this thing look genuine to you?" she asked, holding it up for inspection. Red stickiness and viscera still gleamed on the dagger's blade.

"Genuine what?" Teo asked, grunting with the effort of holding the struggling girl. "Genuine murder weapon? Yeah. It looks pretty authentic."

Eileen shrugged and moved her inspection to the girl's wallet. Inside she found a driver's license, university ID card and a student association activity card.

"Perla Montez," Eileen said. "A junior at the University of Guadalajara." She looked closely at the student association card. "What the hell is *Movimiento de Estudiante de Aztlán*?"

Perla spit at the ground. "Ay, Aztlán! Cowards. Afraid to strike the enemy where he lives! Afraid to drink their blood! We leave them. We are Tianquiztli—the Marketplace. We will take back the price of our land in the blood of the white man!"

"Aztlán?" Teo asked. "Wait a minute. Tianquiztli is part of Aztlán?" He shook the girl violently. *You're part of fucking Aztlán?*

"You've heard of these people?" Eileen asked.

"Aztlán started when I was a kid in the Seventies," Teo said. "They're *la comunista*. They think Mexicans

of Aztec descent are the true inheritors of North America. They want to kick out all the *blancas* and restart the Aztec Empire—Aztlan!”

“Are you serious?” Eileen asked. “There are people who really think they can pull this off?”

Teo shook the girl. “Tell her you’re serious, bitch! Tell her how you kidnap government officials and spray paint your stupid slogans and plant your bombs that kill innocent people like my fa...” He trailed off for a moment. “That you kill people like Ramon. *Tell her, putasca!*”

Perla’s eyes shifted momentarily toward the ruined church. “Not Aztlan. *Tianquiztli!* If you do not support the cause then you... are... the... *enemy!*” She surged forward with an insane strength that almost broke Teo’s grip.

“Teo, wait.” Eileen said. “She was looking at the church. Is that why you’re here? Is there something in the church?”

The girl said nothing.

Eileen slapped Perla across the face with her free hand. “Answer me!”

Teo’s voice dropped into a low and deadly register. “I don’t think you need to do that, Eileen. I have a better way.” The small man closed his eyes and concentrated. He removed one hand from where he was holding her arm and moved it in front of her face. Her struggle was forgotten as Perla watched all five digits on Teo’s hand lengthen into long silver needles. Then, without warning, he jammed the spikes into her head.

The girl’s shriek echoed around the construction site. She writhed, struggling against the digits pushing their way into her brain. Then she shrieked again as the young ghost repeated the process with his other hand.

The girl’s mouth opened. “She’s fighting me—hard,” Teo said. She jerked at the ends of his fingers like some obscene puppet. Then Teo simply vanished, the

girl's violent movements ceased, and she stood up straight.

"She's high," Perla's mouth said.

"What do you mean, she's high?" Eileen asked.

"She's on some kind of a drug. It's letting her fight me. It's also letting her see us."

"What is it?"

"The name she has in her head is *oceano de color*."

"Ocean of color? What the hell is... wait a minute. Pigment? She's on pigment?"

Perla's head nodded. "That's not what she calls it. She calls it *oceano de color* or just 'the sacrament.'" Eileen knew that the black heroin that had recently begun hitting the streets sometimes gave its users the ability to project the way Orpheus agents could, but it also usually retarded the users' mental functions, making them frenzied and violent.

That certainly seems to fit, Eileen thought. She had never heard of pigment giving a user the ability to fight against possession, though.

"What the hell is going on here?" Eileen muttered. Then, louder, "Can you get anything else out of her?"

Teo shook Perla's head. "The Pigment is blocking me. It's all I can do to keep control of her body. If I go rummaging around in her head, she's liable to kick me out."

"Fine," Eileen said. "Then let's go see exactly what she was doing here." She marched off toward the ruined church.

Perla's body lifted first one foot awkwardly, then the other, and followed the American spirit toward the large building.

The church was long and narrow, built of enormous carved blocks of black basalt, piled high to a sloped roof that sported a high steeple. A large, round window over the door was webbed with steel lattice that had once held stained glass. Stepping inside, Eileen noted that

there were portable lamps strung together and attached to a small generator.

"What are those doing here?" Teo asked.

"They probably belong to the landmark commission people or the archaeologists that Laura told us about." She leaned over and flipped a switch on the generator. It gave off a few sputtering coughs and turned over. The lanterns' sulfurous yellow glow filled the church.

"This is it?" Perla's body asked. "This is what Tianquitzli's so concerned about? There's nothing here!"

Eileen thought it was an exaggeration to say "nothing," but not by much. The black walls of the church were mostly unadorned. Round openings that might have once been windows were now empty of glass. What looked like horribly uncomfortable stone pews marched in neat, orderly rows along a central aisle up to a large stage that held a carved granite altar. An enormous statue of a cloaked woman looked down at the long-vanished congregation, her arms spread wide, her face lost in shadow.

"*La Madona*." Teo's voice said from Perla's body. Then the girl's body spoke in her original voice. "*Coatlicue*."

"What?"

"I don't know." Teo replied. "It just came out. Does that name mean anything to you?"

Eileen remembered the words of the Crying Woman, *Coatlicue*, *Mother of Nightmares*. Then she felt something else, something in her head, in her soul. Love. A vast, inhuman love.

Come to me.

Eileen shuddered and then walked up the central aisle, looking right and left along each stone bench, until she finally climbed up to the dais. Barely sparing a glance at the altar she went to the back wall, fascinated by the enormous mounted icon. Like other images she had seen, this cloaked woman had her hood

pulled all the way over her face and the sleeves were draped over her hands.

"Coatlicue..." she whispered. She turned to her partner. "Tell me something, Teo. You were raised by Catholics. Does anything about this place strike you as strange?"

"Are you serious? This whole situation is strange."

"I'm serious, Teo. Look around you—as a Catholic—and tell me what you see."

Her partner thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be seeing—except that this would be the ugliest and most boring church I could ever imagine going to services in."

"Doesn't it strike you as strange that, in what's supposed to be a Christian church, there isn't one cross or image of Christ?"

Teo shrugged. "This place has been cleaned out pretty well, Eileen. Probably the only reason *la Madona* is still there is that the statue is too heavy to steal."

Eileen shook her head. "I don't think that's an image of the Madonna and I don't think this was a Christian church." She walked over to the altar, a stone block some four feet high. "And I don't think that this is an altar in the strict Christian sense of the word."

Perla's head shook as though she was trying to shake something loose. "I don't think she wants you to go near that, Eileen." Her head stopped shaking as the skinriding ghost gradually brought the girl under control.

Eileen ran her hands across the top of the stone block; it was clean and smooth. "No dust, no bloodstains," she murmured. Her mouth quirked when her hands came across a small slit carved into the rock near the floor. "Not Christian at all." She slid the point of the dagger into the notch—it was a perfect fit. There was a loud clicking and a low rumble as the dagger hit home. Perla's body gave a strangled gasp as a hideous

grinding filled the room and the huge block of stone slid back along a concealed track. Underneath, rough, unevenly carved stairs led down into the darkness.

"Is this where you were going, little girl?"

"She won't answer," Teo replied. "But based on the amount of distress in this girl's head, I think we've found what we were looking for."

"You can't tell me what's down there?" Eileen asked.

"No." Teo replied. Perla's body suddenly bent double and for a moment the upper half of Teo's body could be seen. Then Teo imitated her action and re-merged with the girl. "She's fighting me harder, Eileen." She was breathing hard. "It's all I can do to keep her under control."

"How long can you hold her?"

"Not... sure." Teo replied. "Getting tired. I think I can hold on, though."

Eileen looked down the stairs leading into the blackness. "I'm not so sure that that's a good idea. I don't want her at my back if you lose it."

"C'mon boss!" Teo replied. "Tianquitzli is obviously protecting something down there. I don't know if this has anything to do with Francisco, but—hey, ghostly disturbances and pigment users? Too much coincidence for me."

Eileen favored her junior partner with one of her rare smiles. "Teo, I'm going to have to mention that in my report. Analysis isn't usually one of your strong points."

Teo used Perla's mouth to smile back. "Hey, things change." Her shoulder spasmed.

"All right, let me know if she starts to break free. There's probably a tool shed or something where I can pick up a couple of flashlights. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"Don't bother." Teo replied. "I got an image from Perla when you mentioned flashlights. I think there are torches or something at the bottom of the stairs."

"All right then," Eileen said. "Are you ready for this?"

"Hey, we're ghosts. What could possibly be down there to scare us?"

He's whistling in the dark, Eileen thought as she stepped onto the first stair, then looked around her. *Literally*.

The staircase was difficult to manage. Each step was a different height and some of them sloped oddly, giving Eileen's gait an unnatural rhythm as she proceeded down into the darkness. After a few minutes, the stair took a thirty-degree turn to the left, cutting off the dim light from the church. She reached out and felt for the wall with her hands, slowly straining for anything beneath her fingers.

She cried out when her hands found a mouth filled with teeth.

"What!" Teo yelled. "What is it?"

Eileen calmed herself, forcing her mind to go over the sensations her hand had transmitted. *A mouth with teeth—but cold and not moving*. She reached out again and felt the open mouth. She almost laughed as she realized that the sharp fangs and jaws were made of stone, not flesh.

"Sorry, Teo," she called to her partner. "There's a statue or carving on the wall here. It startled me." Her hand remained in the stone mouth and as she moved, her fingers came across something long and round that felt like wood. "And I think I found that torch she was thinking about."

"Hand it over," Teo said. "I'll see if I can light it."

Eileen passed the long piece of wood to the skinrider. A few moments passed and then there was a flare of sickly yellow light as the torch flared up.

"That was quick," Eileen said. "How'd you get it to light?"

"Easy," Teo replied. "It's one of those patio torches, like the ones you can buy in Home Depot. You know, 'Give a bit of Polynesian flair to your backyard barbecue.' It's got its own fuel supply and an attached striker." He handed the torch back to Eileen.

"Thanks." Eileen said. "You seem stronger now. What's she doing?"

"I think she's given up, at least for now. I still can't get anything out of her mind but at least she's not trying to kick me out anymore."

Eileen nodded. "Okay, but stay on guard. This *chica* killed a man in cold blood. I don't think she's the type who gives up easily."

Perla's body nodded.

Holding the torch near the wall where she had found it, she almost started again at the ferocious head that growled at her from the wall.

"What is that thing?" Teo asked.

Eileen inspected the angry-looking feline head. "It's a jade jaguar, I think. It looks Aztec, like the dagger." She waved the torch around, illuminating the rest of the tunnel wall in bits and pieces. Flat bas-relief carvings in a similar style covered every inch of available space, including the ceiling. Every five meters or so, she could see another carving of a snarling animal with a hole in its forehead and a tiki torch in its teeth. "Actually, this all looks like Aztec work."

"You think it's genuine?"

"I don't know—I'm not an archaeologist—but it just might be." She shoved the torch into the jaguar's head and walked forward to the next animal carving. "Still," she said, lighting the next torch and mounting it in the head, "these torches certainly aren't Aztec. Someone's been down here recently."

Perla's face registered Teo's confusion. "I don't understand. Laura said that she had experts investigating the church, wouldn't they have found this place?"

"You're assuming that she *wanted* them to find this place, or that when they did she wouldn't cover it up. If this tunnel really is Aztec, it means Tianquiztli is right, this place is historically significant, and it'll shut down the project. On the other hand, Tianquiztli obviously doesn't want anyone to know about it. That's why they've been pinning their hopes on declaring the church a historical landmark and trying to sabotage the construction of the convention center." The two agents continued moving down the tunnel, lighting and ensconcing torches as they went.

"And Francisco? How does he fit in?"

Eileen indicated the body that Teo was currently wearing. "This girl's a pigment user, Teo. She called it 'the sacrament,' so I assume that a lot of this group is using it. If you're dear departed Francisco, how tough would it be to insert yourself into their deluded fantasies? You're inside her head—it's not like pigment enhances your mental abilities.

"That's pretty smart, actually," Teo responded. "Tierra Arguelles goes under, Francisco gets his revenge, Tianquiztli's secret is protected, and everybody goes home happy, except our client."

Eileen allowed herself a momentary glow of triumph. "It comes with experience, Teo. After a while, most missions for Orpheus start looking alike: the same motivations, the same opposition, and, in the end, the same outcome. The only questions left are Francisco's location and exactly what Tianquiztli's hiding down... oof." Distracted as she was by her own voice, she nearly slammed into a crate that was sticking halfway out the door of a side chamber.

Perla's body gave out a loud shriek, and it took several minutes for the spirit riding her to regain

control. "I'd say we've found something," Teo said at last.

Eileen looked at the four-foot-tall crate she'd stumbled into. The case was unmarked and identical to a dozen others stacked in the small storage area. Unlike those, however, the one she had nearly slammed into had been opened. Straining her nonexistent muscles a bit, she lifted the wooden lid, then took her torch and looked inside the box.

"What is it?" Teo asked.

Eileen felt a chill run through her ethereal blood. "Guns. Lots and lots of guns."

"Guns? What the..." Suddenly, Perla's head rocked back, and a bizarre two-toned scream came from her throat, one part her voice, one part Teo's. Her eyes flashed silver and Teo's ghostly form shot clear of the young girl's body, sprawling on the floor. Now freed from the agent's control she raced ahead into the darkness.

"Teo!" Eileen cried, rushing to her partner's side. The skinrider's shape seemed drained, faded. He was flickering as he got to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Eileen." He gasped and returned to solidity. "She took me by surprise. I couldn't hold her anymore."

"It's all right, Teo," she replied. "Let's go get her."

The tunnel continued for a few hundred more feet, then opened into what felt like a large cavern. The two agents pulled themselves up short as they felt the acoustics around them change.

"What now?" Teo asked.

Eileen never got a chance to answer. Instead, a light flickered into existence at the far end of the cave. As they watched, the torch lowered and a white spark shot from it. Then two lines of flame spread out from the spark, rocketing around the room, gradually bringing light to the dark cavern. The fires were burning in long troughs that ran along the edges of the relief-carved

walls and were filled with some type of pungent fuel. In the middle of the room an enormous decorated column soared toward the ceiling, its top lost in shadows.

Had it been another time, another situation, Eileen might have indulged her curiosity about hidden wonders and historical secrets. This wasn't such a time, though, and Eileen felt nothing but fear, staring at the drugged young girl who stood atop a stone altar similar to the one they had left behind in the church.

This altar was at the end of two curved staircases that rose a dozen feet above the level of the floor. Between the stairs, a black pit yawned, its darkness unrelieved by the flames burning in the trough. Behind Perla was a statue of a hideous humanoid figure, vaguely female, with an open mouth displaying sharp fangs and an enormous tongue that lolled out onto the floor. The statue's two hands were held out in front of it, arms bent at the elbows. One of the hands held a long spear, the other a human heart wreathed in flames.

"Huitzilopochtli!" Perla was yelling "God of war! I call on you to defend your shrine!" Sounds emerged from the pit, a soft chuffing then a low growl. "Tezcatlipoca, Lord of the Smoking Mirror, beloved of Coatlicue, the Earth Mother, accept the sacrifice of your beloved servant and strike down the Conquistadors!" The girl glared at the two agents, eyes glittering in the light of the flames. "Now, Euros, see the faith of the bronze race that will cast your polluted culture back from our sacred shores!"

Throwing her hands wide, the young girl cast herself off the edge of the platform. To Eileen she seemed to tumble toward the dark pit in slow motion. Then the darkness swallowed her, and the two agents could hear a soft thud as she landed. First a growl, then a predatory cry of hunger came from the depths. There was a moment of silence, then a human shriek, quickly cut off and replaced with the wet sound of flesh being torn from bones.

A shaft of golden light poured down from the ceiling, directly striking the stone altar. A smaller shaft of silvery light, almost obscured by the gold beam, also hit the broad dais. Eileen and Teo stared, dumbfounded, as the beams of light resolved themselves into human forms. The first was dressed as a warrior-priest in a grand costume, with leather sandals painted bright green and covered in white geometric patterns, cowrie-shell shinguards, a black kirtle draped with eagle feathers around his waist, and beaten leather armor chased with gold spread across his broad chest. It was, Eileen realized, worked and decorated to resemble a screaming eagle about to take flight. Strapped across this apparition's back was a sturdy, round shield, and on his head was a truly impressive headdress, the front shaped like a snarling dragon and bright feathers from dozens of different types of birds cascading over his head and down his back.

The man in armor was beautiful. It seemed to Eileen as if all the light in the room was somehow focused on him. Indeed, the shining blue-tinted brightness of the man almost completely obscured the hooded and cloaked figure behind him. This one—Eileen couldn't tell if it was a man or woman—stood behind the warrior, head bowed with a subservient air. Eileen tried to look at it, but found that her eyes seemed to slip off the figure, as though it were beneath her notice.

Teo edged closer to Eileen as four transparent warrior spirits, resplendent in feathered helmets and burnished leather armor stepped two by two through the stone wall and the trench of fire. The columns of light faded and the feathered soldiers surrounded the agents. The soldiers carried a variety of weapons—spears, swords, nets, bolo—and all looked well versed in their use.

"Uh, Eileen," Teo said, beginning to back toward the entrance to the tunnel. "I think maybe we might want to call for some help."

Eileen nodded as she, too, began moving toward the passage from which they'd entered. "I think you're right, Teo. Let's go." The two agents spun around, and the warrior spirits dropped into an expectant pose, long, cruel-looking spears pointed outward.

"Alto!" The dragon-masked warrior-priest on the altar didn't shout, but his voice echoed through the hall, filled with power and assurance. Despite herself, Eileen felt her legs stop. "Volten!" Both agents turned around, their material-but-unreal bodies jerked about as though pulled by a string. The priest then jumped lightly to the floor and strode down the right-hand set of stairs, shadowed by his black-clad companion. Neither agent could see what the priest's companion looked like under its cloak, although its arms bent in disturbing ways, and the robe occasionally bulged outward as though something inside was trying to escape. The yowling and roars from the pit grew louder as the priest approached, then quieted as he looked into the hole, smiled and held up one hand.

Eileen felt strong hands on her as one of the guards grabbed her. The remaining three surrounded Teo, immobilizing him. Teo attempted to pull away, but the warrior ghosts just shook the strong man around a bit, never changing the expression on their flat, chiseled faces.

"This?" The ghostly priest said as he approached. "This is who they send to stop the *Ritual de los Muertos*?" In his right hand he held a sword that superficially resembled the ones she had seen the costumed marchers in the square wielding. Basically a thick wooden club, the sword had a hilt carved to resemble a serpent with a curved hook on the end. Everywhere else, the sword was liberally studded with razor-sharp pieces of obsidian.

They're jaguar warriors, Eileen thought. She had smiled at the quaint beauty of people dressed like the ancient Aztec killers during the Day of the Dead

celebration. There was nothing quaint about the man she now faced, however. Everything he wore, and the weapon he wielded, looked completely functional and deadly. Indeed, judging by the black crust caked on the side of the man's sword, it had seen frequent use.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked.

"I know what you look like," Eileen replied, trying to force bravery into her voice. "You look like Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war. Since that's what that poor deluded girl called you, I'll assume that's who you think you are."

Huitzilopochtli leered at her, "And what makes you think that I'm not?" She noted that the left half of the ghost's face had been painted white, with markings around his mouth that made it look like a skull. The other half had a line of dark green spots running down it. It took her a moment to realize that the markings weren't paint.

"First, you're speaking to me and your men in Spanish, not Nahuatl. Second, based on those lovely teeth you've got, I'd say that during life you were the beneficiary of some very expensive and very modern dentistry. Third, even under your stains I can recognize the face of Francisco Arguelles."

Francisco lost his superior smile and lashed out with the obsidian sword. Eileen screamed in pain as the sword tore into her upper arm. Elsewhere in Guadalajara her flesh split open and blood splashed along the bed in the Orpheus nursery. Cool, efficient medical technicians hurried to bandage her wound. "You will *not* call me by that name!" Francisco yelled. "That was what I was called before *She* came. Before my ascension unto godhood!"

Good Lord, he really thinks he is Huitzilopochtli, Eileen thought. He's cracked. She felt the hands that restrained her tighten their grip. Unfortunately, he's not the only one.

Francisco walked back toward the pit, waving to his soldiers to drag the two agents closer. The hooded figure in black followed him. Eileen tried to get a glimpse of his face but was stymied by fog that seemed to cluster inside the hood. More and more details of Aztec mythology, gleaned during the voracious hunger for reading that had gotten her through a difficult pregnancy, clicked into place. *That's supposed to be Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror*, she thought. *The god of thieves and liars.*

As Francisco drew nearer to the pit, the growling increased in volume.

"This one is powerful." The voice was the hooded figure's, although Eileen felt like she wasn't hearing it so much as feeling a thought that had slithered directly into her brain. It made her skin crawl in ways she couldn't explain. It was the voice of the thing that had peeked in her window as a child, the creature that had hidden under her bed and had never been there when she looked. It was what peeked over her shoulder in an empty room and made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

The warrior turned to the hooded figure. "Do you think she can be turned?"

The black figure examined her closely. A tiny reptile in her head froze in the presence of a predator, praying it would just pass by, and more blood flowed from her breast than she ever remembered.

"This one has known loss," said the voice-not-a-voice. "It knows the pain of a child's betrayal. It needs family." Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, briefly glanced at Teo.

Francisco turned to face his prisoners. To Eileen's surprise, he addressed them in English with a distinct West Coast accent. "You're thinking that I've gone insane, aren't you? Don't worry, you can answer. None of my men understand English." His smile was radiant,

all his former menace evaporated into understanding and compassion.

"No..." Eileen answered carefully.

"That's all right. You see me, dressed up like an Aztec god and think, 'Oh, Laura's husband's gone around the bend.' Let me assure you—I haven't."

Eileen didn't reply.

"That's all right," he said. "I don't expect you to trust me right away. You're working for Orpheus and for my former wife. I'm the enemy, right? Except, I'm not. I'm your friend."

Teo snorted. Eileen ignored him. "You know about Orpheus?"

"Of course. Don't you think we expected Orpheus to interfere? I hardly thought you'd find this place, but now that you have, perhaps it will work out for the best." He reached out and placed a hand on Eileen's blood-covered breast.

Nicholas's tiny hand squeezing her finger. The smell of his newborn skin. The rush of love as he nursed.

Francisco gently stroked the breast, seemingly oblivious to the dark blood that was oozing over it.

The strong musky scent of her husband. His strong arms gripping her tightly, laying her down on the bed. The warm rush of lovemaking and skin-to-skin contact.

"Family and love. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Come with me. Feel Her love."

"Eileen! You're not listening to this asshole, are you?" Teo's voice wasn't warm and magical. It wasn't even pleasant.

It's real, though, she thought. Ghost or no, Teo's real.

"Get your hand off me!" she said, slapping Francisco away from her chest.

Francisco pulled his hand back to his own chest, nursing it as if it had been burned. He changed then, the beauty and compassion draining away to be replaced by a towering, inhuman rage. "You're a fool," he said. "Just like the rest of Orpheus. You're all fools! You're children playing with forces beyond your comprehension, and when they begin to rise, you'll all be slaughtered, and you won't even know what's killing you!"

"That's it," Teo said. "I've had enough of this fruitcake. I'm going to tear him a new asshole." His body changed faster than Eileen ever remembered it doing, the fissures on his skin opening as he let his rage fly. The spikes shot out from his elbows, and his hands elongated into deadly claws. In a blur of motion he was on the three jaguar warriors holding him.

Francisco's face darkened and he made a gesture. Suddenly the soldier holding her had a wickedly sharp dagger at her throat. "*Alto!*" he yelled. "Stop or she dies!" Teo paused for the briefest instant, and the three soldiers battling him took immediate advantage. They quickly immobilized him, and without changing expression, lifted the skinrider to his feet and threw him screaming into the pit. The roaring began again, the sound of tearing along with Teo's screams. Then it grew quiet.

"Teo!" Eileen shouted into the pit, then turned to Francisco. "You piece of shit! I'll kill you again, and you'll fucking stay dead!"

"Did you think this was a negotiation?" Francisco roared. "Did you think that you would sweet-talk me like some movie villain until I revealed my dastardly plot? I am Huitzilopochtli for the stupid masses, but I have discovered a power behind the legends of gods and monsters." His eyes flashed with a depth of insanity that went far beyond what Eileen had seen when he was pretending to be an Aztec deity. "I have discovered She Who Sleeps Beneath the Storm. She has raised me far

above some mere god! You have power Eileen and that is all that's keeping you alive. That value lasts until the Chupacabra reaches you."

He snapped his fingers and she heard the *chunk* of claws tearing into stone.

Chupacabra? she thought, vague stories of goat-killing predators scratching at her memory.

The cloaked man's voice was back inside her head. "You call us spectres," he said.

Her mind went white and began babbling the insane analogies her Orpheus basic training instructor had made her memorize: *Shark is to goldfish as wolf is to terrier as spectre is to ghost*. More experienced agents had boiled it down to one simple piece of advice: *Run and don't look back. It might be gaining on you*.

The thing in the pit was climbing out. Despite herself she leaned over, looking down into the darkness. Two tiny points of light glittered at the bottom, red flashes filled with a hatred as vast as the universe, growing larger as the thing drew closer.

"*El tiempo vuela*," Francisco said, switching back to Spanish. "Choose."

In desperation, Eileen did the only thing she could. She gathered her anger against Francisco, her fear, her rage and her grief for Teo, and she screamed. She screamed the way only a banshee could.

The scream gathered power, tearing through the ether between her and the psychopath in armor. Every one of the jaguar warriors around her, including the ones holding her, clapped their hands to their ears. Francisco, however, was caught in the full fury of the blast, and the gauze that held his ghostly form together developed enormous gashes.

Eileen didn't wait to see how long it would take him to recover. She fairly flew out of the cavern, her ghostly gown trailing behind her. From the cavern she heard a roar when the thing from the pit reached the floor level, and a foul stinking wind blew through the tun-

nel, extinguishing the tiki torches. When she reached the staircase back up to the surface, she risked a brief glance behind her. In the darkness she could see an area of even deeper blackness, an impression of a large shaggy head and two baleful red eyes gaining on her.

Finally, Eileen reached the top the stairs, the black basalt church looked just as dead and empty as she remembered it, however there were now noises coming from outside the door, a slow rhythmic chant accompanied by beating drums and mournful guitars.

The stench of the spectral predator behind her was growing stronger. She could hear its claws on the stone of the steps. Spurred into action, Eileen charged out the church doors toward whatever was outside.

Even in her panic, what she saw brought her up short. A parade of costumed marchers was coming down the street toward the construction site. They resembled the costumed *Día de los Muertos* marchers she had seen elsewhere in the city in the same way the spectre behind her resembled a normal ghost.

No two outfits were the same, but they all shared a horrific sensibility that made them resemble a uniform for damned souls. One young man was dressed as a skeletal raven, the long beak of his mask crooked and sharp. Another woman wore a painted shroud and a large papier-mâché skeleton, on her head, that managed to look as if it were screaming. A stilt-walking skeleton trailed shrouds, behind it, that looked like torn strips of flesh. Dozens of hungry ghosts mingled among the marchers, and in the middle of it all, waved two banners, the burned remnants of the American and Mexican flags.

Tianquixtli, Eileen thought. *Oh my God, Francisco's calling his followers here.* Her only desire now was to get back to the Orpheus building. Somebody had to know, had to be told. Orpheus would know what to do before this cult could complete its work. A muted roar sounded behind, sending her feet into motion.

Heedless of whether or not the marching horde could see her, Eileen charged headlong into the crowd, shoving walkers and musicians out of the way. Cries of surprise and pain followed her, and several of the tortured ghosts looked as if they might turn to attack. Then the spectre landed among them, and both ghosts and humans suddenly had bigger problems to worry about.

Behind her she heard the screams of the first marchers. The spectral beast was little more than swift and blinding violence made manifest. Taking a quick glance back, Eileen saw a vaguely feline figure, claws tearing into the flesh of the living and the gauze of the dead. She couldn't quite make out what its head looked like, since most of it was blocked by the broken figure of a young girl in its misshapen jaws, blood scattering as it shook her corpse. Worse than that, however, was that the rest of the marchers were ignoring the carnage in their midst. Like a river, the parade split in two and simply flowed around the creature, entered the construction site, and headed toward the black church.

The rest of Eileen's run passed in a blur. Eventually, she saw the enormous black box of Orpheus' Mexican headquarters ahead of her.

Home, she thought. Safe.

An orange glow was rising from the plaza where earlier that evening she had seen the *Día de los Muertos* revelers and the more ordinary ghosts of Guadalajara. Rather than music now, though, there was the crackle of fire, cries of pain and the sounds of police sirens.

The glass doors of the building hung open. *Orpheus needs to know*, her mind raced. *They have experts who can help. They'll tell me what to do, how to stop Francisco...* She raced across the empty lobby, absentmindedly noting a trail of muddy footprints on the clean marble floor.

The elevator closest to the front door was already open. Eileen stepped inside and pressed the button for

the fourteenth floor. The doors chunked shut and she was somehow calmed by the whirr of the elevator as the car rose toward the sky. A tinny Muzak version of *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head* oozed from the elevator speaker and Eileen found herself gently humming along with it, using her own voice to soothe her jangled nerves. The walnut paneling, the bright digital numbers of the floor display changing—it all felt so reassuringly normal.

Eileen felt almost human as the doors slid open and she stepped out into the empty hall. Rushing past the empty doors to Cardinale's office, she concentrated what was left of her will and manifested. Fatigue and trauma made it difficult, though, and she knew she'd appear distinctly ghostly, a translucent figure draped in wispy robes swaying on unfelt winds. *Better than not appearing at all, though.*

She turned the doorknob, opened the door and stepped inside calling for the director-general. "Señor Cardinale! I need you out here—"

And then Eileen nearly fell to her knees.

Behind her desk, the receptionist Señora Torriente was slumped in her chair. Her eyes had been removed and a little pink thing peeped out of the gash in her neck.

"Señor Cardinale!" Eileen screamed. "Señor Cardinale!"

Eileen rushed into the director's private office. He was tied to a chair, hands and feet twisted around, every finger broken. His head was thrown back, and she could see bright purple bruises on his face. His nose had been broken, and blood had flowed from it, over his mouth, and stained his expensive white shirt.

"Señor Cardinale?" Eileen whispered softly, approaching slowly. He wouldn't answer, she knew he wouldn't answer, but she kept calling his name anyway, a lifeline that she couldn't let go. It was then that she noticed the armored door in the corner of the room was

open. She looked at the man in the chair and back to the door. He had been tortured for the code.

It was all too much. Her mind was slipping off its tracks, matching the madness her world had become. She crossed over the threshold of the nursery door and took in the sight of two dead bodies sprawled across the floor. The medical technicians. *Two dead bodies. Not three. Two.* Eileen's own body was gone. Without it, she was going to die.

Truly die. Oh, God, I'm going to have to face what comes next.

Eileen's ghostly form screamed. It was a banshee wail, a cry of loss and grief. The stereo set exploded and the furnishings crumbled into splinters. Then she crumpled to the floor, curled into a ball and shrieked into the emptiness of her own mind.

She didn't know how long she lay there, sobbing and pleading with something, some God, some force higher than herself and better than the things she had seen, to tell her what to do, to tell her that everything would be all right. Eventually, though, the paroxysms of anguish subsided, swallowed in the empty calm that settled over her. She stood up, and everything around her seemed preternaturally clear. All that was left was to do her duty.

Report, she thought. *I have to report.* The telephone had been torn from the wall by the force of her scream. She moved back out to the director's office and used the phone on the desk. "A1A," she whispered to herself, dialing the number for the Orpheus central office. "Code A1A. Mexico operation. Complete loss. A1A" The phone rang and rang and rang. Nobody answered. *That's impossible*, she thought. *This phone is always manned.* The phone continued to ring, then someone picked up and slammed the receiver back down.

Eileen looked at the number on the phone's LCD readout. It was the right number. She hit the redial button. The phone rang three times and then stopped.

"Hello?" The voice was high pitched and odd-sounding. There was another voice in the background, giggling.

"Who is this?" Eileen asked. "This is Investigative Consultant Eileen Savitch with a code A1A. I need to speak with my project leader immediately."

"Hello?" This time the giggling was louder.

"Didn't you hear me?" Eileen asked. "I said I need to speak to my project leader. Rebecca O'Hare. Code A1A!" "Rebecca O'Hare?" The high-pitched voice didn't seem to be speaking to her. Sure enough, she could hear the second, giggling voice answer. "She must mean her."

"Oh, *her*!" There was the distant sound of crashes and yells of panic on the other end. "Sorry, she can't come to the phone right now. She's busy. Everybody's busy." A new voice, someone else, came through the line, a voice in intolerable agony: "Oh God, where are my eyes!" A click, and nothing but a dial tone.

Eileen heard a sound behind her, a snap and a hiss of static. A blue glow was coming from inside the nursery. Eileen turned around, dropped the receiver and walked into the room. The television had turned itself on. Snow covered the screen as the volume knob turned, filling the room with the hiss of a dead channel. Then there was a voice, distant, like someone speaking through the wrong end of a megaphone a vast distance away.

"...adio fr... eath..."

An image flashed on the screen, writhing maggots squirming around on a diseased piece of meat. Then there was the voice again, slightly stronger. "Radio Free Death. Need to find..." another burst of static. "Orpheus. Any Orpheus..." Eileen had heard of Radio Free Death of course, though the company took pains

to warn its agents against listening to the spectral voice. Some had claimed that Radio Free Death had helped them in the past, others that its information was too cryptic to be of use to anyone.

"Hello!" she shouted at the TV screen. "Hello. Can you hear me?"

More images flashed on the screen. A rivulet of blood running down stone, a close-up of some kind of diseased flesh, and then an image of a woman Eileen recognized as her project leader, Rebecca O'Hare, silently shrieking as blood and viscera from her ruined eye sockets ran down her face. The static returned and the voice came through again. "Urgent... any Orpheus agent... being destroyed..."

Eileen dropped the phone and stepped forward, banging on the TV screen. "Answer me!"

One more word came from the television: "Run."

In her head, the voice of the Llarona echoed: *one who knows more than he should, one who is many places at once.*

"I don't know if you can hear me," she said to the television. "I don't even know if there's anything of Orpheus left to tell, but if there is, get this out to them. Tell them that the things we thought were separate have a common cause. Pigment, the cults, the spectres. They're all connected somehow. The Beast under the Storm, Coatlicue. I don't know what it is but someone's got to find it!" There was no response from the TV. Eileen wondered if the mysterious voice of Radio Free Death had heard her and in her heart she knew she'd never know.

The phone was ringing.

She almost laughed. The sound was so normal, so businesslike. She slowly walked out of the nursery and looked down at the phone. The receiver was off the hook, a whining sound coming from it, and the light for the phone's second line was blinking.

She picked up the phone and pressed the button. "Hello?"

"Señora Savitch?" It was Zoia Arguelles, panicked. "Señora Savitch? Are you all right? Please, I need your help."

"You?" she chuckled bleakly. "You need my help?"

"Please, Señora Savitch. My father has taken my mother down to the construction site. Some of his followers broke into our home a little while ago and took her. They said that if I didn't bring you down there, they were going to kill her!"

Something clicked in Eileen's brain. "Of course I'll help you, Zoia. Can you come get me?"

"Of course," Zoia replied. "I'm in the company limo. I'm on my way."

Eileen nodded, though she knew the girl couldn't see her. "Wait in the car, Zoia. I'll meet you there when you arrive." Zoia voiced her agreement and hung up.

Eileen had nothing to gather save her strength. She thought about Llarona.

You will fail. You will fail and die. But in your failure lie the seeds of success.

Nicholas. Thomas. Images of love and family.

Teo, she thought, then squared her shoulders, shrugged on greater solidity and marched out of the Orpheus office. A quick elevator ride and she was waiting in the street, looking as real—as alive—as the next woman. Her banshee gown was there but more subtle. The bloodstain at her breast was a tight dark splotch. In the distance, more orange lights burned and police sirens wailed. A few minutes later, a long dark limousine pulled up.

"Thank you so much, Señora Savitch," Zoia said, as she swung the car door open.

"Eileen," the agent replied.

"Eileen."

Eileen slid into the car, staring straight ahead as the car started up and pulled away from the curb.

"What are you going to do when we get there?" Zoia asked, as the long car drove through streets filled with panicked citizens. Eileen could see people dressed in *Día de los Muertos* costumes, their eyes wild with pigment, tearing through the streets, throwing garbage cans through store windows, firing weapons and lighting fires. "Can you rescue my mother?"

"Shut up, Zoia," Eileen barked in reply.

The young girl looked shocked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said, 'Shut up.' You're not taking me to rescue your mother. You're taking me to die with her. What would you have done if I hadn't believed you? Would you have sent a couple of your father's faux-Aztecs to drag me down to the car?"

"I don't know what you're talking about...."

"Stop it, Zoia. Don't treat me like an idiot. Who had the authority to pull the security off the site tonight? Who knew exactly when Teo and I would be going down to the Juarez Center just in time for us to 'catch' a member of Tianquiztli and 'discover' the cave under the church? Oh, and by the way, those blue feather earrings just make it easier to figure out."

"But... But..." Zoia sputtered.

"She cannot stop us now." The voice slithered into Eileen's ear just as the glass divider between the passenger and driver compartments slid down, revealing a skeleton in a black suit steering the car through the streets. "Can you?"

"Marco Calavera," Eileen said.

"So many names," the voice said. The skeleton's form shimmered and became a black-garbed figure in a hood. "I am Tezcatlipoca. Sometimes I'm something completely different. I am what She needs me to be."

The skeleton was back at the wheel. "Tonight," he said, "I am merely your driver."

"You're more pleasant as Marco."

"The skeleton is not my true face. This voice is not my true voice. I do not speak with your kind. You hear what you wish to hear filtered through my will. What would you like me to be?" the skeleton asked.

"Be Tezcatlipoca," Eileen replied. "If it's not your true face, it's at least more honest than a smiling bag of bones." Her contempt filled the car's interior.

Faster than she thought possible, the limousine was passing through the neighborhoods of Guadalajara. Slowly, the buildings around her began to decay as they approached the Posada.

"Tell me something, Zoia," Eileen said. "What could your father have offered you to betray your mother and destroy your birthright?"

Zoia's face had changed. She no longer even tried to hide the acid in her voice. "What makes you think I'm going to destroy my company?" She jerked her head out the window where the glow of distant fires still burned. "After tonight, there will be an even greater need for my company's services as the city struggles to rebuild. With my mother out of the way, I will be in charge."

Eileen laughed. "Are you serious? Zoia, you're going to be the living puppet for the ghost of your father! Is that the way you're going to live your life?"

Zoia shook her head. "You still don't understand, do you? My father has shown me what's coming. You think the rampaging of a few cultists in Mexico is the end result? This isn't even a taste of the powers that are rising in the world. In the end, everyone will have to make a decision to lead, follow or be crushed. I chose as my father chose—to be among the leaders."

The limousine had pulled through the large gate into the construction site. Dozens of the cultists stood, staring into space. Others had collapsed and their tortured spirits were struggling to pull themselves out of their bodies, either because the pigment had given them the ability to project temporarily or because they had died. Eileen couldn't tell which.

The limousine had pulled to a stop, and the figure in the hood stepped out and opened the door for Eileen to exit. Zoia got out on her own and fingered the vibrant feathers dangling from her ears. "How did you know that the hummingbird was sacred to Huitzilopochtli?"

"I actually didn't. But I do remember pictures of it in some of the Aztec material I read back in the day. That, and your father's ghost is dressed in a shitload of them. I guess poor taste runs in the family."

Zoia's voice cut through the night. "Enjoy that, puta. It's your last mockery."

The living girl and the ghost marched the agent into the church and down the uneven stairs. The tiki torches were lit again, and she could hear bizarre reedy music coming from the cave ahead, along with a low sonorous chant. As they passed the carvings, Tezcatlipoca looked around at the carvings on the walls.

"Some truth here," he said, "mixed with monkey mythology."

"This place is a real historical treasure," Zoia said, as if she was conducting a museum tour. It's where we came up with the idea of using Tianquitzli. With their beliefs they were a natural for us."

"Who's us?" Eileen said. "Who are you?"

The young woman chuckled and pointed to the carved tiles. "I don't know if you can understand these, but they tell the story of Coatlicue."

Tezcatlipoca's voice filled her mind:

Darkness and chaos existed before Creation. Female Earth Monster swam in the water, devouring all she saw. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca decided to impose form upon Earth. They became serpents and struggled with the Earth Monster until they broke her in two. Coatlicue's lower part rose to form Heaven. Her upper part descended to form the Earth. Yet her spirit remains. As flesh, Coatlicue

devoured human hearts and would not bear fruit without human blood. As spirit, she now consumes the souls of men.

They were approaching the cave now. It was even more brightly lit than before. In addition to the burning trench, more torches had been placed around the room, filling it with a diseased, orange glow. The pit remained dark, however. Rows of costumed people stood swaying, their worshipful awareness completely focused on the tableau under the deformed statue. Behind the stone table, Francisco stood, resplendent in his feathered armor, waving a wicked stone knife while his widow wife kneeled next to him, her hands bound.

"You do not worship me, my *descarriados*!" Francisco was screaming as they entered. "No, you worship the future of the bronze race and the one who will bring you that future—Coatlicue!"

"Co-at-li-cue," the crowd chanted. Eileen couldn't tell if it was the haze from the fire pits or some other effect, but the mob seemed to be changing. Spirits flickered in and out of bodies and flesh seemed to melt. The crowd was becoming Crowd—a monstrous empty fleshy thing of arms and mouths and breasts and need.

"Yes, Coatlicue, the one who will remove the stain of European culture from our shores! We will take back *Día de los Muertos* in her name. We will slaughter the Conquistadors and place the bronze people back where they belong—at the heart of a restored Aztlán!" Crowd gave a ragged cheer.

"But first, *mis amigos*, there is much to do, and our sacred work begins tonight. You are the last of Tianquiztli, your brothers and sisters are already out doing their sacred work—destroying the white man's culture and harvesting blood and souls for Coatlicue. Soon, you will take the sacrament and some of you will be filled with fire and strength to burn—others will cast

off your flesh and harvest souls for the Holy Mother. Are you ready?" The cheer was louder this time.

"This is ridiculous," Eileen said. She hadn't tried, but her voice shot through a brief moment of quiet and was heard by everyone in the hall. Francisco shot a venomous look her way, but quickly recovered.

"Of course, *hermanos y hermanas*, we will face opposition." He gestured to Zoia as she and Tezcatlipoca began shoving Eileen toward the altar. "Here is an agent of the *Conquistadores*, one who uses her witchcraft to work their will—focusing all of their strength on keeping the bronze man in his place."

"This is absurd, Francisco," Eileen said, as she was shoved up to the altar. She deliberately ignored what her eyes were seeing, forcing herself to think of Crowd as individual people. *Maybe it's not too late*, she thought.

"I mean, this is a very lovely piece of theater," Eileen continued, "and you've certainly got these people fooled, but you can't think you'll succeed. Listen, people!" she yelled out to the crowd. Her voice, backed by anger and resignation, echoed through the room. "This is not Huitzilopochtli. The Aztec god doesn't exist! This was Francisco Arguelles, and he's a goddamn ghost. He's as far from being a god as you can get. When he was alive, in fact, he was pretty far from being a man!"

Crowd stopped its humming but didn't seem convinced. It just stared at her, listening.

Sheep, she thought. *Sheep waiting for a shepherd.*

Francisco seemed outraged. "How dare you question me in front of my followers! They know the truth—I have shown them the future where the pyramids will rise again, where the *pelota* games will be played and the hearts of our enemies will be wrapped in soft tortillas and offered up to the risen goddess!" He raised his hand and a fountain of lava began flowing from the statue's mouth, over the tongue and into the trench.

Eileen backed away, trying to avoid the splashing magma. Then she stopped. *No heat, she thought. It's an illusion. A good one, but still an illusion.*

She looked at Laura Arguelles. She seemed bruised but not too badly damaged. Her eyes were filled with terror, though, staring at the stone knife her not-so-dead husband was waving around, frequently coming within inches of an ear or a nose. The daughter Zoia had stepped back, trying to avoid the splashes of illusionary lava. Tezcatlipoca had withdrawn even further, making himself an obscure blot near the edge of the dais.

"You cannot stop me—us!" Francisco's smooth tongue stumbled over the word. "We are the future, and the power of their faith and love makes me invincible!"

Faith and love? Eileen thought. *Of course, faith and love, that's the answer!* She drew on the pain and longing Orpheus had taught her to channel, pitching her voice so it became that of a lost child, swallowed in the hubbub of a raucous crowd, but still able to find its mother's ear. Laura alone would hear her.

"Laura—listen to me. Your husband needs faith and love—he feeds on it, it's what fetters him here. Take it away from him."

The woman's eyes were uncomprehending for a moment, then something seemed to click in her head.

"Francisco," Laura Arguelles whispered, looking up. Her voice was dry and cracked but grew stronger as she used it. "Francisco. *¡Francisco—oye me!*"

Almost without realizing he was doing it, the ghost in armor turned to face the bound woman, his head dropping and his shoulders slumping. "Yes, dear," he said. The tone of his speech had changed, for a moment it was the whimper of a whipped puppy. Then it grew strident again. "Shut up, bitch! Shut up—you have no power here. *I am the power here.*"

With a groan, the heavy woman lifted herself off the ground and looked Francisco in the face. "Still living in your fantasy worlds, aren't you, Francisco? 'Nobody recognizes my greatness, nobody gives me a fair chance, *nobody loves me!*' You make me sick."

"Shut up, Laura!"

Eileen began humming under her breath. Her voice had become the hum of an appreciative audience, swaying in rapture as a hero rose to confront evil. The sound was far different from the maddening babble of Crowd.

"That's all you can say, isn't it, Francisco?" Laura said, growing stronger as Francisco collapsed into himself. "'Shut up.' Somebody confronts you with your lies, your deceptions, your inadequacies and all you can say is, 'Shut up.'"

The feathers on Francisco's head drooped, his armor lost its sheen, and the designs on it faded as he lost his concentration. "You never let me live!" he screamed. "And the first time I confronted you on anything, *you had me killed!*"

"You let me kill you, Francisco. You were too weak to stop me. It took you thirty years to plan one confrontation, and in the end I still brought you down because I went where you were afraid to." She took a step toward her ex-husband and he stepped back, the stone knife clattering to the ground.

The costume of an Aztec god was almost gone now, the colors blending and muting, transforming into the ragged remains of a conventional business suit. Still, he spat whining protestations at his wife. "You kept me from being what I could have been and turned me into a puppet. Now look," he waved at the confused mob watching the confrontation, "I have the power now—even death couldn't kill my greatness! You will fear me and worship me and then I will have my beast feed on your soul!" There was a roaring from the pit.

"Mother—stop this or I'll kill you where you stand!" Zoia had retrieved the stone knife and was holding it in front of her. To Eileen's shock, Tezcatlipoca stepped forward and took it out of her hand.

"No," it said. "This is the test. To have the power, he must know no love other than Her."

Laura apparently heard none of this. Her attention was on the pathetic ghost who now stood in the remains of the suit he had been buried in. "Worship you?" She laughed, a sound that seemed to physically wound Francisco. "Like these idiots? Poor pathetic Francisco."

"I'll kill you, Laura!"

The heavyset woman blasted her contempt at Francisco. "Then do it!" she yelled. "I killed you, so I guess it's only fair. That's all you can do, though, little man. You can kill me but you can't make me fear you, you can't make me worship you, and you can't make me love you. Your whole life was a lie and even in death you're still living a lie, shrouding yourself in the glory of a dead civilization. Kill me, Francisco! I'm tired of your whining. I'm never going to worship you. I'm never going to respect you—and *I'm never going to love you!*"

Eileen saw it the moment it happened, the very instant that Francisco Arguelles realized he was never going to be able to resolve the unfinished hate that had kept him in this world, the moment where he just let go.

There was a cracking sound, like the whole world was opening up. The illusionary lava stopped pouring from the statue's mouth. The stone underneath Francisco's feet began to soften and turn red, then boil. A brimstone stench rose from beneath him, and Eileen could hear what sounded like a storm blowing and a distant scream.

"Help him!" Zoia screamed at the congregants. "Help your god!" Crowd was gone. Now there were

only costumed citizens milling around, unsure of what to do. Eileen didn't have that problem. Though her manifested fist had never been a match for poor Teo's abilities, it was more than sufficient to take down one little girl.

Francisco shrieked as oily claws rose from the liquid rock, grabbing at him and pulling him down. His hands reached out once more in desperation and then he was gone, the portal closing behind him with a crack that echoed through the cave.

All was silence for a moment, then the massed congregation began to scream and run, desperately trying to find the way out. She couldn't understand what had panicked them until she saw one of them lifted up and torn to shreds in a pair of barely visible jaws. She turned to face Tezcatlipoca. It was staring at the spot where Francisco had been drawn to whatever fate awaited him and shaking its head sadly.

"Stop that thing. You've lost!" she said.

The shrouded face looked up and transformed again, back into the skeleton. "Lost?" He laughed. "Francisco was a tool, nothing more. As for the spectre, I'm afraid that now that its master is dead, it's going to rampage until it's destroyed." The beast was continuing to tear through the crowd, manifesting and unmanifesting itself as necessary to slaughter both living and dead. The skeleton looked around, raised his hand, seemed to tear open the fabric of the universe, and vanished.

Eileen could hear the heavy footfalls of the beast from the pit as it drew closer to the dais. As the growling got louder she noted the thick column that held up the roof and made her decision.

"Can you get out?" she said to Laura. The large woman was cradling her unconscious daughter's head in her lap.

"I'm sorry, my love," she was whispering. "I should never have let things get this far."

"Hey!" Eileen yelled. "We need to get out of here. Can you move?"

Laura shook her head. "Look at me—I'm too heavy to run. That thing will get me before I go ten feet. I don't want to die that way." She looked down at the still form of her daughter then looked up and smiled. "Besides, I've seen that something comes next. I don't know exactly what that is, but maybe I'll have a chance to make up with my baby."

Something filled Eileen then, something she wasn't accustomed to experiencing. Hope.

Eileen smiled at her. *Nicholas. Thomas. Teo.* "Maybe we will."

It barely took a moment for Eileen to gather up all the pain and misery and fear she had experienced and channel it through her will. The voice of the Llarona echoed in her mind: *You will fail, Eileen Savitch. You will fail and you will die.*

"Then so be it," she said. "I've died before."

She unleashed a scream, a terrible wail that spewed forth all the pain she had ever suffered or witnessed. It tore through flesh and powdered bone. It slashed through spirit and pulverized rock.

At first nothing seemed to happen, then pieces of stone flaked off the column, and cracks appeared at the base. The entire column groaned as tons of earth held in delicate balance shifted out of alignment. Slowly, majestically, the column collapsed and millions of tons of stone came with it. As the world fell in, Eileen used the last of her fading will and phased out of existence.

When she awoke, it was in dark, a smoky blackness without echoes. She was pinned by stone, but a bit of concentration allowed her to move through the material.

I'm alive, she thought. *How am I alive?* The last moments of the cave flashed through her memory and she recalled the last bit of will she had used to unmanifest

herself. Above her she could see the sodium construction lights.

I did it! Carefully phasing through the stone, she followed the upward slope, eventually moving up and out until she reached the construction site. As she did so, she noted absently that the entire site had collapsed into a huge crater filled with rubble. Shaking her head, she slowly walked away into the dark streets of the Posada. The district was empty. No one, neither living nor dead, seemed to have survived the collapsing ceiling.

“What will you do now?” The voice was there beside her, followed by the sudden appearance of a grinning skeleton in a mariachi suit. Eileen stopped walking and turned to confront it.

“Go away or kill me. I’ve beaten you,” she said. Battered and exhausted, she no longer cared which.

The skeleton shook his head, disappointed. He transformed into the hooded figure. “We thought Francisco would be the perfect tool. We were wrong. Still, that lesson will be useful as we move forward.”

“Who’s ‘we’? Move forward with what? I’m so tired of this cryptic shit. What were you doing here? What’s the purpose of all this mayhem?”

“Join us,” he said. “She can still love you.”

“Join you? I don’t even know who you are.”

“It’s not time yet. When we are ready, the world will know who we are.”

“Then I’m not going to join you. I’m going to fight you.”

“Your body is dying,” the hooded figure said. “It will not last the night. We have made sure of that. If you do not join us, you will truly move past the veil. You will not like what you find there. We can save you.”

Eileen shook her head. *Thomas. Nicholas. Teo.* “I don’t think so,” she replied. “Whatever’s there, it’s got to be better than you.”

The hooded figure made a sharp left and began to walk away. As he did so, the form shifted, at first it was the skeleton, then she was looking at the back of a small, nondescript man wearing a prisoner's orange jumpsuit. The voice remained the same, however.

"Have you ever read the Bible?" he asked.

"Isn't that a rather unusual thing for an Aztec god to ask?"

The man in the orange jumpsuit stopped but did not turn. "From the Book of Isaiah, chapter 14:

"Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.

"All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?

"Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee."

"What the He—" Eileen suddenly changed her mind. "What on Earth does that mean?"

"Hell from beneath is moving to meet thee, Eileen—and she's very, very hungry." The orange shape began to walk away.

"We'll stop you, you know," Eileen shouted at the retreating form. "Orpheus is not going to sit back and let the world be threatened by the likes of you!"

"The likes of us? You work for killers and bring down stone and earth on the citizens of Guadalajara. Do you really think you should be making moral judgments?"

"We'll fight," she said, but her voice sounded hollow and empty even to her. She was too aware of the tangled remains of the construction site, now the tomb for the Arguelles women and Francisco's followers. The twisted iron reminded her of the steel and glass remains of a car.

The spirit turned around one last time and smiled at her. Somehow, the power and menace of this little man

was worse than any monster she had ever faced. It was an evil different from the dementia of Francisco Arguelles or the alien ferocity of the Chupacabra spectre or even the hissing voice of Tezcatlipoca. The smile that never reached the man's dead black eyes was a human evil, an utter clarity of moral purpose that knew exactly what was right and good and had rejected it, taking joy in the most degenerate foulness it could find.

"You're so smart, Eileen. So well educated." The voice was completely normal and all the more terrifying for it. "Read your mythology again," he said. "In the story, Orpheus failed." He turned, walked into the darkness and disappeared.

Eileen stared after him for a long, long time.

CORRIDORS

RICK

CHILLOT

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement, Old Furnace Room
September 20, 11:55 p.m.

The dog yawns. The man tries not to stare at the walls, or at the things that drift lazily inside them. He watches the woman cross the room and stop in front of him, within kissing distance. She pulls her bloody hair from her face like a curtain, and she has no eyes.

"Why are you all doing this?" he asks her.

She laughs, and the laughter is accompanied by other sounds. "But darling, I'm only giving the people what they want. You hear it all the time. Someone dies and for years the mourners don't shut up about it. Every night they cry out in their minds, *come back, come back, come back.*" She lays a gloved hand against his cheek. "Well, guess what? We heard you. We're coming back."

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 317
September 20, 9:03 a.m.

Ed Lighthouse opens his eyes.

He sits up. He's on a bed, on top of the blankets and sheets. He rubs his eyes, swings his feet to the floor.

The room: Run down and nondescript. Faded wall-paper with a nearly invisible floral pattern, a dead garden drained of all color except the anonymous shades of decay. A low pile carpet, brownish, peppered here and there with stains and cigarette burns. A nightstand by the bed holds a digital clock blinking 12:04, 12:04, 12:04, a radio, and a lamp whose brass finish has been rubbed away in several places. A closet door, open, reveals a rack of paper-covered wire hangers. A dresser stands against the wall opposite the bed, one of its legs missing, replaced by a stack of magazines.

Ed stretches, waits for memories to stir. His body feels strange, somehow. He wonders if he's coming down with a cold.

A long moment passes, and still Ed cannot recall where he is, or why he's there.

Ed stands, fully awake now. He's a tall man, six-foot-three at least. He needs a haircut. His arms and

legs are thin. His pale skin and reddish brown hair reveal his father's Irish heritage. He's dressed like a schoolteacher even though he hasn't been in a classroom for a year: khaki pants, nondescript button-down shirt, cheap shoes. He stares at a cobweb near the ceiling and tries not to hyperventilate. "Okay," he says out loud. "Okay." His own voice sounds odd to him. He presses a hand to the bed. The sensation feels distant, as if he's wearing gloves. He wonders if he's been drugged, if some anesthetic hasn't yet worn off. He reaches behind his ear and begins tracing the zigzag scar that runs down his neck to his shoulder. The nervous habit calms him a bit.

"The experiment..." Ed whispers. Right. The experiment. Didn't they say there might be disorientation? They'd tried to teach him some breathing exercises, but he'd ignored the lesson. There's an easy chair next to the dresser. Ed sits down—the chair is surprisingly stiff—and closes his eyes.

He can remember the Orpheus laboratory—the staging room, they'd called it—a chamber of subdued lighting and dark alcoves. Along one wall, the coffins... pods, you were supposed to call them. It was his day. His turn. After months of preparation, Ed's time had finally come. And then...

"Ahhh! Christ!" Pain storms through Ed's brain. He squeezes his eyes tight and presses his hands to his head until it passes.

"Holy cow," Ed mumbles, opening his eyes. And then he understands what this means. The experiment has failed.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 816

September 20, 9:06 a.m.

Maria uncoils the vacuum cleaner cord, straightens up, and winces at the pain in her back. In three more days her son will be home from college. She has so much cleaning to do in her own house, and here she is vacuuming a room that hasn't been occupied in over a year. Her son sounds so different when he speaks to her

on the phone, so distant. School has changed him. She wonders how he'll react when he returns to their small and dilapidated home.

The vacuum cleaner comes to life and makes her hands shake. She works it methodically over the carpet, and is halfway across the room when she hears the sound. An infant crying, screaming, its wails growing louder and more desperate. When her son was just six months old, he had a terrible fever that lasted for days. Yet, even at the height of his sickness his cries were not this awful. Maria wishes she could cover her ears, but instead she pushes the vacuum faster. *It's a trick, she thinks, not real. It happens every time in this room, and I will ignore it.*

Just three minutes later she can tolerate the sound no longer, so snaps off the vacuum in frustration. The engine dies and, as always, the crying dies with it, until she's left with silence and her own breathing.

Blue Palace Hotel, Eighth Floor Master Suite April 19, 8:00 a.m., Thirty Years Ago

She puts down the bottle of vodka and rubs her temples. She resolves to have the manager install darker curtains in all the rooms. The sitting room stinks of that clumsy man's cologne. Such cowards, men. Frightened off by the cries of an infant.

She stares across the room at the crib. She hears the rustling sounds inside it. The creature is waking up again. Perhaps she was too hasty firing the latest nanny, but she just can't tolerate the intimate presence of such a lowborn woman.

Her child begins to cry. "Please," she sighs. "Please, not yet." The wailing grows louder and she reaches for the vodka bottle. The thought of walking across the room, of touching that mewling stinking thing that had possessed her body for nine months and then forced its bloody way out of her, is more than she can bear. She regards the row of baby dolls sitting on the shelf above the crib, considers their bright eyes and cheerful plastic faces. Fantasy is always superior to

reality, she thinks ruefully. She finds the vacuum cleaner and switches it on. The noise drives the cries of the infant from her mind. Just barely.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 317 **September 20, 9:25 a.m.**

Ed walks into the bathroom, wondering if something is wrong with his vision—the strangely muted colors of the carpet, the walls, the furniture. He regards his hands, turning them over and back again. His skin seems oddly colorless. His fingernails are so washed-out they're practically gray.

The faucets of the bathroom sink won't turn. Ed leans forward, his hands against the counter, and lets his chin drop to his chest. He considers going back to bed.

There is a flicker of motion. Ed turns, but the room is still and silent. He notices the shower curtain. Isn't it moving, shaking just a little bit? He stares, but nothing happens. Ed steps closer. And there: a ripple of movement, down near the floor. Something. Ed takes hold of the shower curtain and tugs.

A hand slips out from beneath the curtain, and an arm, stretched over the side of the tub. Blood runs down its fingers, falling onto the tile.

"Jesus!" Ed shouts, backing away quickly, but his hand still clutches the shower curtain, and he pulls it aside as he moves. Ed sees the body lying in the tub, a naked woman, water up to her waist, her back slumped awkwardly against the wall, her head tilted backwards and her half-open eyes fixed toward the ceiling. Her forearms have been sliced open like gutted fish. Streaks of blood have congealed on her arms, and blood swirls in the bathwater like black ink. There are three bands of blood on her left cheek, where she'd pressed her fingers to her face.

"Oh, Jesus. Jesus God." Ed backs farther away from the tub, feeling behind him for a wall, a towel rack, something, afraid to turn his back on the bloody tub. The floor tilts beneath him and he nearly falls to his

knees. He catches his balance and runs out of the room, runs to the door, finds it impossible to open. He pounds the door with his fists, kicks it, pulls on the knob with both hands. "Someone!" he shouts. "Hey! Someone open this door! Hey!"

Ed's strength is evaporating. "Somebody do something," he hears himself say. And then he wonders, *What if she's still alive?*

Hadn't he seen her lips move?

Towels, Ed thinks. *Wrap them around her wrists. Stop the bleeding.* He runs, hoping quick movement will keep his fear controlled. "Hold on," he shouts to her. "Hold on, there's someone coming!" He feels his feet slip, the mat slide out from under him and he's falling. Falling right toward the blood-slicked bathtub. He closes his eyes and reaches out blindly.

Ed grips the side of the tub and stops his fall. He opens his eyes. And the bathtub is empty.

It's empty of water, of blood, of anything but some lime stains around the drain and a ring around its inside. He touches the floor of the tub and finds it bone dry.

Ed stands. He turns in a slow circle, regarding the whole room, and sees nothing unusual. He's sweating. His head hurts like he'd just swallowed his tenth cup of coffee. *So this is what it's like when you're about to faint*, he thinks. *This is what it's like when your brain decides to just shut down.*

Then there is the sound of a key in a lock.

Ed doesn't know what to do.

A young woman enters, holding her coat over one arm, carrying some sort of bag or large purse in the other. She's dressed in white, her straw-blond hair pinned up. Some sort of identification tag is pinned to her blouse.

"A nurse. Oh, thank God," Ed says with a sigh. "Thank God. I don't know where you've been, but I've been awake for, like, a half-hour now, and I have no idea what the hell's going on. So please, fill me in, give me a..."

Ed's voice trails off. The woman doesn't seem to hear. She walks across the room and drops her coat on the bed. Her face is vacant, as if she's sleepwalking. She places her medical bag on the nightstand, walks past Ed without acknowledging him, and stands in front of the dresser.

"Hey," Ed says. "I'm over here. What's going on, you don't speak English? Come on, I need some help...."

The nurse opens one of the dresser drawers, rummages through it, then closes it. She starts taking the pins out of her hair. When she's done, her yellow brown locks hang down to her shoulders.

The nurse turns away from the dresser and walks back toward the night stand. Ed steps in front of her. "Look, I don't know what they told you, but Orpheus said whatever happened I'd get whatever care I needed. So why don't you..."

The nurse doesn't react. Ed is walking backwards to keep in front of her, but she continues to ignore him. Exasperated, Ed stops walking. The woman collides with him.

She grips Ed's shirt to steady herself. For a moment her eyes seem teary and pleading. Desperate. Then her face melts into confusion. "What?" she says, shaking her head and pushing away. She stares at Ed, just inches in front of her. "Who are you?" she shouts at him. "What are you doing in my room? What do you want?"

"Your room? But I thought—"

"Go away!" she shouts, louder than before. "Go away and leave me alone!" With that she pushes Ed with both hands, and he flies backwards into a wall and slumps to the floor.

"Jesus, lady," Ed gasps. He starts to stand up, then thinks better of it. "Holy cow." He regards the nurse glaring at him from across the room. She's slim and not particularly tall; he wouldn't have guessed she could move him so easily. "Okay," he tells her. "Okay, look, I'm just here by mistake, okay? I don't mean any harm. I'll go." He feels desperation rising in his voice. "But please, could you just talk to me for a second? Just tell

me where I am? I mean, you're a nurse. I really need some help here. Maybe you could call 911 or something."

Her severe expression softens. "You're in room 317 of the Blue Palace Hotel," she tells him. Then she adds, "What's wrong with you? Are you on medication?"

"I wish I knew." He pushes himself back across the floor and sits against a wall. "See I—well, it's hard to know where to start." He stares at the floor, notices some dust beneath the bed. "You know, I had an aunt who was a nurse. She was my favorite relative. I didn't visit her that often, though, because of her dog. I hate dogs, I... I'm sorry, I tend to ramble when I'm nervous." Ed clears his throat. "The thing is, I—have you heard of the Orpheus Group? They're this, sort of, research group. Government-funded, experimental stuff. And I think something went wrong, because..." He sighs. "My name's Ed, by the way." When she doesn't answer, Ed looks up. The nurse is gone.

Ed stands. "Couldn't take my company?" He looks around the room, sees no one. "Hey, Blue Palace, that sounds kind of familiar. What city would that be in, what state? I'm really at a loss here, because..." Ed passes the bathroom; the door is open. Without thinking he walks in and tries to turn on the sink. The handle still won't budge. "You know, what's with this sink, I could really use..." Ed hears the sound of running water behind him. The bathtub faucet is on.

A sick feeling rises in his stomach. And just before he turns around, just before he sees her draw the scalpel down her arm, Ed realizes that the woman he'd been talking to has the same face, same hair as the woman he'd seen in the bathtub. He holds a hand to his mouth as he sees the blood spread into the water, as he watches her body slump against the tile. And his brain is shrinking to a pinpoint. He can witness no more, he only wants everything to stop. And that's when the scene vanishes and the bathtub is empty.

When Ed can think again, he's standing next to the bed, staring at the white sheets. He knows now what

he's seen, but finds it difficult to say it aloud. "A ghost," he finally whispers. "They warned me about that. She's a ghost. I just saw a goddamned ghost." And it is then that he begins to wonder if maybe the experiment isn't over yet.

He notices the door to the room is open now.

Street Outside the Blue Palace Hotel

September 20, 9:20 a.m.

Outside the Blue Palace, the sky is gray and the air is edged with an early hint of winter. A construction crew hunches like a pack of gargoyles around the pothole they are here to fix, arguing about who will go back to the garage for the equipment they forgot. A green sedan with a dented quarter-panel slides around the traffic cones, the driver cursing as he ejects a cigar butt out his window. Two homeless men lounge inside the corner bus shelter, throwing stones at a squirrel that skitters up an anemic maple tree. The doorman at the hotel checks his watch and stamps his feet to distract himself from nicotine withdrawal. There's a sharp popping sound, which may or may not be a gunshot, from the vicinity of the pawnshop across the street.

Patrolman Joseph Rossi ignores the sound. He is concentrating on balancing two slices of pizza on a paper plate that is too small for them. The pizza is hot, his other hand holds a liter of Pepsi, and he's in a hurry to get back to his squad car before his break is over. Barker, the prick, is likely to drive away the minute the half hour is up. *Such a fucking boy scout*, Rossi thinks. On the other hand, he knows Barker will be revolted by seeing him eat pizza at nine in the morning, so there is that to look forward to. Rossi has to shift his fingers every few seconds to keep them from burning. He's starting to think that the guy at the pizza shop gave him a small plate on purpose, that he's one of those business owners who doesn't understand the importance of giving a cop a free meal, even if it means firing up the pizza oven early. Maybe he should go back there and have a talk with him.

“Your fly’s open, motherfucker.”

Rossi drops the food. The voice was right in his ear, so close he could feel the breath on his earlobe. His throat tightens in anger, but when he turns to face whoever cursed at him there’s no one there. No one on the street is near him. He stands in front of the Blue Palace Hotel, turning in a circle and back again, but no one is within speaking distance. No one is even looking in his direction.

His pizza landed cheese side down.

Street Outside the Blue Palace Hotel September 20, 9:20 a.m.

Terrence Green slides his eyes up and down the hotel’s twelve stories, and considers the flaking blue paint and cracked brick, the piles of trash in the corners of the courtyard, the hooker waiting impatiently just inside the glass doors, the smoke-damaged awning that hasn’t been replaced since the fire four years ago.

Terrence’s bare arms are well muscled, his eyes are fierce, and his dark skin is like polished metal in the overcast morning light. He’s larger than life, but a middle-aged woman and her elderly husband walk out of the hotel and pass within inches of Terrence, not looking at him, not seeing him. Terrence glances at them for a moment, then regards the building again. When he squints, he can make out a dirty haze that clings to the walls like cobwebs. It’s thickest at ground level, and thickens again a few floors up, but its wisps reach up to and past the roof. In places the miasma bulges outwards from the walls, as if following the contours, not of the hotel, but of some other structure that can’t be seen. Terrence is tempted to try again to push through the mysterious cloud and enter the building. But despite its apparent insubstantiality, he’s learned that to him the barrier is all too solid. He sighs.

Terrence ignores the activity around him. He stands almost motionless, unseen, unacknowledged by passersby. A policeman walks past the hotel, some pizza in one hand, a bottle of soda in the other, as oblivious to

Terrence as everyone else. Terrance watches him approach, then furrows his brows slightly and, just as the policeman passes him, shouts, “Your fly’s open, motherfucker.” The policeman stops so suddenly that his pizza falls out of his hand; he spins around, but sees no one near him, certainly no one near enough to have shouted in his ear. Terrence, standing four inches to his right, laughs and goes back to his work. He pulls an old-style army radio out of his knapsack and opens the circuit. A burst of static comes from the receiver. He lifts the handset to his mouth. “Orpheus is down, Orpheus is down. Any Orpheus operatives in the area, you’re in danger. Orpheus is down.”

Blue Palace Hotel, Third Floor, East Hallway September 20, 10:14 a.m.

Ed can see now that the corridor isn’t really endless; that had been an illusion caused by the dim lighting and dull walls. He feels a little calmer now. The hallway evokes a feeling of familiarity; there’s something about the color of the walls, the feel of the carpet—even the smell of the place—that makes Ed relax.

“Orpheus... down.” The voice comes from behind him, above him. “Orpheus... down,” it says again, a man’s voice, loud, almost demanding. Ed turns around, looking for the source. He stares at a spot on the wall a few inches below the ceiling. Then he sees it, high on the wall next to a light fixture: a speaker, so covered with thick gray paint that it’s hard to separate from the visual monotony of the wall.

Ed waits, but the voice doesn’t come again. He reaches for the speaker. The wall feels strangely warm. Ed presses his palm to it, and the wall seems to give imperceptibly, as if it’s pliable. It seems to be moving, ever so slightly, slowly, pulsing out and then in again. It feels moist, though he can’t see any moisture on the wall or his hand.

“Yes, the climate control in this hotel leaves something to be desired.”

Startled, Ed turns to see a tall, well-dressed woman leaning against the opposite wall, looking him over from head to toe through her half-closed eyes. She wears an elegant, if slightly old-fashioned, black evening gown, and a string of pearls around her neck. Her jet-black hair is piled on her head in a complex style that's come slightly undone. She wears long evening gloves and a bracelet that shimmers as she pushes a lock of hair into place. She's in her forties perhaps, and her features combine the best of maturity and youth. She's beautiful. "You look awful, darling," she says in low, breathy tones.

Ed swallows. "I, uh..." He swallows again to stop his stuttering. "I've had an awful morning so far."

She arches one expertly-tweezed eyebrow, and purses her glossed lips thoughtfully. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she says, smiling just slightly.

"Ah, well, it's funny you should say that. Um..." The woman looks familiar to Ed but he can't bring himself to say so. "You're dressed awfully nicely, is there a..." He can't think of the word. "A formal going on?"

The woman sighs. "Not for years, I'm afraid. But you should have seen this place in its prime. Ah, the times we had..." She smiles crookedly and steps toward Ed. "It's lonely here these days." She places one hand on his face. "Let's get to know each other, shall we? And who are you?"

"I'm, uh," Ed takes her hand and guides it away from him, squeezing it once. "Ed Lighthouse. Hello. You know, I need to find a phone, it's sort of an emergency."

She stares for several seconds, then points toward the far end of the hall. When Ed says nothing, she turns and walks in the opposite direction, slowly. Even in his confused state, Ed marvels at how low the back of her dress is cut.

Ed walks down the hall, and is about to round a corner when something lying near the floor catches his eye. Ed bends down; the object is a doll, a plastic infant in a simple dress, white with pink trim. He picks it up and turns it in his hands.

"What?" Ed drops the doll in revulsion. The hair has been pulled out of its head, and its eyes have been removed. Its face is partially melted, leaving no trace of the original features. Lips, nose, cheeks and ears are blurred together in a single swirl of flesh-colored plastic. Someone has drawn crude new features on it: black dots for eyes, an inverted seven of a nose, a slash line for a mouth, not quite curved enough to be smiling.

"That's mine." When Ed looks up he sees a young girl, perhaps ten or eleven years old, glaring at him. She has a dark complexion and frizzy black hair tied back with a single green ribbon. She wears jeans, a pale red T shirt, and sneakers much too big for her. Her head is cocked and her lips are set in a defiant expression. "That's mine," she says again, putting her hands to her lips.

"I'm sorry," Ed answers her. "I didn't know." She says nothing, shifting her attention from his face to the doll at his feet and again to him. "Uh, my name's Ed," he says to her, taking a step back from the doll. He smiles. "I'm a little jumpy today. You startled me. Are you staying here at the hotel? Can you tell me—"

"I've been waiting for you to come out of there. What took you so long? He wants to see you right away." She bends down and scoops up the doll. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

"Whoa. Um... I think you'd better slow down, kiddo. I'm sort of having a bad day here. I have no idea what you're talking about...."

"My name is Tina, not kiddo. It's really Christina but everybody calls me Tina."

"Okay, Tina." Ed smiles. He often finds talking with children more pleasant than talking to adults. "So, do you happen to know what city we're in?"

She gives him a disgusted look. "Don't you know anything? Or are you trying to trick me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I think maybe you're not really the one we want, but Mr. Goodman says so, and he's real smart. So let's go already before some smilers find us."

"I'm not... what..." Tina is already walking away from him. "Look honey, I can't play with you right now," Ed says. "I need to find a phone, do you know where one is?"

She turns around and stares at him with her hands on her hips. "Come on," she calls. "Mr. Goodman said! We have to go see him right now!"

Ed shakes his head, and walks in the other direction.

**Blue Palace Hotel, Third Floor, East Hallway
September 20, 10:20 a.m.**

"Honey, I'm thinking of taking some time off. Don't argue, I'm pretty sure they'll give it to me...." Jack Levine clears his throat and starts again. His words are slow and steady, matching his step as he paces down the hallway. "Honey, I'm going to take a few weeks off. I'll demand it. And they'll give it to me, because I'm their best... one of their best salesmen. I..." He shakes his head. "Honey," he says, "Nothing's more important than you. I know how much the chemotherapy takes out of you, and I want to be with you, so I'm taking some time off and that's that." He loosens his tie and unbuttons the collar of his shirt.

The payphone is in the middle of the hallway, an old-fashioned booth set right into the wall. As Jack reaches it, he fumbles in his pocket for change. He pushes open the door. He leans against the wall, drops in the coins, dials the number. He wishes he'd slept more last night, but some noise kept him awake. A mouse or something, some kind of tapping in the wall, just loud enough to startle him every time he began to doze.

"Is the doctor there? Did you talk to him today?" Jack switches the receiver from one ear to the next. He hopes Agnes can't hear his voice quivering. He has to be strong for her. Positive, upbeat. *Pretend it's a sales call*, he tells himself.

"I see," Jack is saying. "I see. Are you feeling any better? Mhmm." Jack runs a hand through his thinning hair. He decides he'll lie down for a nap after this.

"Listen, honey, I've been thinking... I know, I know, just let me talk for a moment, okay? I've been thinking and I..."

Jack swallows. *Do the right thing*, he's thinking. But what was the right thing? Would she really want him there in the hospital with her? The treatments were so expensive, wouldn't they both be better off with more money in the bank? Insurance will only go so far....

"Honey," he tells her suddenly, "I've been thinking and thinking and I think it's best I don't take any time off right now. I—that's right, that's right, I know. I know. But this therapy is so expensive and our bills are piling up. I think I should stay on the road for a few more weeks... oh, honey, don't cry. It's for the best, I..." Jack licks his lips, he pulls the receiver away from his ear and closed his eyes. *This is crazy*, he's thinking. *Fuck the money. Fuck everything. I need to be with my wife.*

He puts the phone to his ear and opens his mouth to speak. "Listen, I, I don't know why I..." The words won't come. He can't make himself talk. Finally, he hears himself saying, "Honey, I have to go now. I'll call you back in the morning. Mhmm."

When he puts down the receiver, he can't make himself let go of it. He feels as if the phone is still connected to her, as if he's holding her hand. He realizes his shallow breathing is turning into deep, shivering sobs. She begged him, begged him to come and see her. And he backed out of it. He's not a man, he realizes. He's a coward, a worm, just as he always suspected. He lets his hand slip from the phone, and walks away, back to his room where he can drown in his misery.

**Blue Palace Hotel, Third Floor, East Hallway
September 20, 10:20 a.m.**

Ed rounds a corner, spots the PHONE sign jutting out from the wall, and sighs with relief. He gets closer and sees that the phone booth is occupied by a middle-aged, tired-looking man dressed in a wrinkled suit and tie.

The door of the booth is open and Ed hears the change falling into the slot.

Ed glances up and down the hallway, wondering where Tina might have gone. Probably her family is on this floor. Strange kid, talking like she was in a world of her own. He's seen kids like that in his classroom, and they're always the first to be persecuted by their peers. *She'll need that tough attitude of hers*, Ed thinks. He looks toward the phone booth again. Now someone else is standing there, clearly intending to use the phone when the businessman is finished.

Ed shakes his head. Where did this new guy come from? Hadn't he seen Ed waiting, or didn't he care? Ed walks closer, intending to say something, but he stops short. The newcomer is dressed strangely. He wears a long overcoat that stretches to the floor, and a knit stocking cap pulled low over his head. The light near the phone booth is burned out, and the man in the coat is in deep shadow, but it seems to Ed that his coat is ripped and stained in several places. Ed sees now that the newcomer is unusually close to the phone booth; he's practically inside it, and the man in the booth is ignoring him. Do the two know each other?

The man in the coat has his back to Ed, and the man in the booth is looking right at the phone, as if he can see the person on the other end. Ed decides to wait. He hears the businessman's voice.

"Hi, it's Jack. Is the doctor there? Did you talk to him today? I see. Are you feeling any better? Mhmm. Listen, honey, I've been thinking... I know, I know, just let me talk for a moment, okay? I've been thinking and I..."

As Ed watches, the businessman—"Jack"—pauses for a moment and takes the receiver in both hands. At the same time, the man in the coat reaches one arm into the phone booth. Ed steps sideways to get a better view, puzzled at what he's seeing. The man in the coat places a gloved hand on Jack's shoulder, as if to comfort him. Jack doesn't react to the touch. He doesn't look up.

"Honey, I've been thinking and thinking and I think it's best I don't take any time off right now. I—that's right, that's right, I know. I know. But this therapy is so expensive and our bills are piling up. I think I should stay on the road for a few more weeks... oh, honey, don't cry. It's for the best, I..." He pauses to catch his breath. "Listen, I, I don't know why I..."

Jack watches the man in the coat place his other hand on the back of the businessman's head. For a moment, the businessman holds his mouth open, silently. Then he says, "Honey, I have to go now. I'll call you back tonight. Mhmm."

Ed watches Jack put down the receiver. As the man in the coat takes a step back from the phone booth, Ed realizes that Jack is crying. Ed feels suddenly like a voyeur. He turns away from the scene and tries to arrange himself as if he'd seen or heard nothing.

When Ed turns around again, he sees Jack walking down the hall, slowly shaking his head. The man in the coat is nowhere to be seen.

The phone is free. Ed lifts a hand to the receiver and there's a flare of pain in his head as memories rise up like a cluster of balloons.

Orpheus Facility #6, Level 4, Undisclosed Location September 20, 06:12 a.m.

Ed feels as if he's underwater.

There's a stillness all around him, and a lightness to his body. He's out of the pod, walking around the lab, amazed. It's the same room he'd been in hours before, but so different. The colors are changed, some muted, some enhanced. The lighting is odd. The gloom and shadows are not as dark, but the lit areas are hazier than normal.

They said it would work, and it did. They said it would be like nothing Ed had ever experienced, and it was. Ed thinks this must be what it feels like to walk on the moon.

Ed can't remember leaving the pod, but here he is, standing in the middle of the room. He takes a step

forward. It's not like dreaming at all. It's like being awake inside a dream. He raises a hand in front of his face. It seems solid. He feels solid.

As far as Ed can tell, there's no one else in the lab. That seems wrong to him, like an empty classroom. He walks over to the nearest computer station. The screen shows a matrix of numbers, some changing, some not. At the bottom he sees the text: *Lighthouse, E.*

It's my telemetry, Ed realizes. Yes, that's my pod over there.

He walks to the pod. It's a torpedo-shaped capsule set at a forty-five-degree angle. Ed recalls that the pods are repositioned periodically to keep the bodies inside from developing stress ulcers. He puts a hand against it. The metal feels warm, but distant, as if he's wearing gloves.

There is a low vibration. Ed feels it through his feet. Earthquake? No, he decides, probably some generator somewhere just clicked on. He looks around the room, wondering why no one else is here. A team of doctors is supposed to be on site the entire time. He decides it doesn't matter. This is just a test run. After fifteen minutes, the computer will activate the automatic return and start waking him up.

"Incredible," Ed says out loud. "Spirit separate from body. Just like they said. Holy cow." His voice sounds flat and echoless. He turns back to the pod. He has to look. He leans over until he can see through the one-way viewing port.

Oh.

It isn't like looking into a mirror. Not like a reflection or a photograph. He sees himself, his own body, as if it's another person. *That's my face*, he thinks. *Do I really look like that?* He squints, sees the scar on his neck. He has an urge to touch it. He's glad his eyes are closed.

And then Ed realizes he's had this experience before. He recalls looking down on his bleeding body after the car accident months ago, standing over it as paramedics picked glass from his face and wrapped his lacerations with white gauze. And years before that,

back in college, he straddled his body and looked into his own dead eyes. He feels dizzy. Is this happening now or is he somewhere else, remembering it?

He raises a hand to steady himself, then reaches to touch his own face through the glass.

Blue Palace Hotel, Third Floor, East Hallway September 20, 10:45 a.m.

Ed stands in front of the phone booth, hands shaking. He doesn't want to remember anymore. He feels stupid as he wonders who exactly he should call. The Orpheus emergency number, he thinks, staring at the keypad. He'll just start dialing and the numbers will come....

He feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, one by one by one.

Ed jerks his head and looks up and down the silent hall. There's nothing to be seen but rows of doors, all closed. He takes a breath, then a deeper one. There is a smell in the air. He sniffs. Something musky and wet fills his nostrils. His earlobes feel hot. There's a tickle in his throat.

"What the hell is that?" Ed whispers, and backs away from the phone booth. The smell—raw meat, mixed with animal musk and sweat. The skin on the back of his arms itches. His mouth is dry. There's a sound, somewhere, a noise that he feels more than hears, a low rumbling.

A growling.

A formless dread rises in Ed, and he can't touch it with coherent thought. *Do something!* His body won't respond. He can't make his arms move or lift his feet. He's a fly caught between two window panes, paralyzed. *Don't move!*

There, at the far end of the hallway. A shadow falls across the floor. Angles. Curves. Motion.

Ed turns. Ed runs.

He's barely aware of the doors flashing past him as he pumps his legs forward, again and again, pushing himself as fast as he can. He turns a corner, almost

falling as he shifts direction. He hears noises behind him—a deep snarl, the pounding of heavy limbs against the carpet. He doesn't dare look back. The smell is strong now: canine, animalistic, fur and saliva and blood. There are tearing noises as heavy claws rip into the carpet with each step.

There is an elevator ahead of him. The doors are open.

He sprints, no longer thinking in words, pushed only by unrelenting instinct: escape, escape, escape! Just a few more seconds, and he can be in the elevator—

But the doors are closing.

"Oh, God!" His cry is guttural, barely more than a grunt. The elevator is just an arm's length from him now, but the doors are closing, the strip of light between them narrows and narrows and narrows and is gone.

Ed's left arm and shoulder crash into the doors. He fumbles for the button, sliding his hand across the wall, feeling only the smooth surface of the wallpaper.

Ed turns to look down the hall. There is nothing there.

His hand finds the button. He pushes repeatedly, but it doesn't respond. There is no give, as if the button isn't real, just painted on the wall. And then he hears the low growling again. Something rounds the corner of the hallway, something he won't look at, can't force his head to turn and see. On the periphery of his vision—a huge shadow with a pair of red eyes. The shape comes slowly, patiently until Ed has to close his eyes in terror and cover his face with his hands. He hears it running at him and he slides his arms in front of his throat, braces himself for the teeth that will rip through them and into his neck.

Then all thought is gone, and he pushes against the elevator doors, clawing at them, screaming. And suddenly the resistance is gone, the doors have not opened but they suddenly have no more substance than a ray of light. He passes *through* them, tumbling, tripping, and

finds himself inside the elevator, sprawled on the floor that seems as solid as it should be. There's a humming sound and he feels the elevator dropping.

"I went... through the door?" he whispers, and stands on shaky legs.

"Big deal. Anybody who's dead can do that." Tina is standing beside him. "Franny says you should see something before we go to the basement. Right, Franny?" The doll's head bobs up and down.

Blue Palace Hotel, Elevator #2 **September 20, 10:45 a.m.**

Audrey switches her overnight bag from one shoulder to the other. She reaches to the inside pocket of her blazer for a cigarette, then remembers she's out. "Damn," she mumbles. "Hey, you got a cigarette?"

Linda puts her bag on the floor and crosses her arms. "You know I'm on the patch." She stares at Audrey for a few seconds, then watches the floor lights change as the elevator works its way downward.

"Sorry," Audrey says. "I forgot." She taps her fingers against the wall of the elevator. "Listen, next convention let's make sure they put us somewhere decent. I got hardly any sleep last night and I was like a zombie all day. You know that guy from D-Tech, the one who kept coming back to our booth? He started asking me about multi-user options for version 3.1a and I was so fogged out I had to tell him I'd look into it and get back to him."

Linda frowns, and makes a mental note to bring someone else on the next trip. Maybe that new guy, the one with the legs... "You didn't sleep?" she asks coolly.

"Hardly a wink. Didn't you hear all those noises? That creaking sound? Once, I was sure somebody was walking around the room. I even turned on the light. But nobody was there."

The lights in the elevator flicker. "Jesus," Audrey says. "How old do you think this hotel is, anyway?"

Linda opens her mouth, but before she can speak the elevator jerks to a stop. Both women steady themselves against the walls.

"What the hell?" Audrey asks.

"Wait," Linda says. "This isn't our floor, it's..." She scans the floor indicators. "It says it's the fifth floor." The doors slide open.

"There's nobody here," Audrey says. There is some overhead lighting just outside the elevator doors. Beyond that is an unlit hallway stretching into gloomy darkness.

Linda stabs the G button with her index finger. The doors stay open, the elevator doesn't move. She presses the button several more times, then the CLOSE DOOR button. To no effect.

"Shit," Linda says. "Look, I don't know about you, but I'm starting to not trust this elevator. Why don't we get out here and find the stairwell—what?"

Audrey cocks her head. "Huh? I didn't say anything."

"Oh, I thought I heard something."

"Anyway, yeah, let's get out before this things falls apart or something."

The women step out of the elevator. For a moment they stand in the circle of light, regarding the dark corridor ahead of them. Then the elevator doors snap shut behind them.

"Shit," Audrey says. "Shit, shit." She presses the button, but there's no response.

"Forget it," Linda says. "Come on, let's look for the stairs."

"No lights down there," Audrey says. "What's with this place? You think there was a power failure?"

"Look." A rope is stretched across the hallway with a sign attached: NO ENTRY.

"Well, now what are we supposed to do?"

"Look, Audrey, see the scorch marks on the walls? I read there was a fire here ten years ago."

"Yeah? Well, you'd think they would have cleaned it up by now."

Linda moves to step over the rope. "We have to find the damn stairwell. Come on. Just watch where you step."

"What's that supposed to—"

"No, stop! Don't."

The voice comes from behind them. They turn toward the elevator and see someone standing under the ceiling lamp. It's a pasty-faced man with wild hair and wide eyes. "Don't go down there, please," he shouts. "It's not safe!"

They look at each other. "Jesus," Audrey says. "That just about gave me a heart attack."

"Is there a problem?" Linda calls back to the man.

"He must be a maintenance guy or something," Audrey mumbles.

Linda takes a few steps toward the stranger but stops before getting within arm's reach. "Look, do you work here? Because that elevator's not working."

He seems to be staring over their shoulders. Then he looks at Linda and says, "This floor isn't safe. You need to get out of here."

"Well, that's what we're trying to do. Come on, Audrey."

"Wait a minute, Linda. I'm not going down that hall if the floor's going to collapse or something."

"So what are we supposed to—"

"There," the man blurts, pointing. "The stairwell's right there." He indicates a metal fire door with a small window of safety glass, just to the right of the elevator.

"Shit, Linda, the damn stairs are right there. How did we miss that?"

For a moment the two women stand there, staring at the door. Then they watch the stranger. He stares back at them, then looks off into the distance behind them. He steps to the side, moving away from the fire door. "Please," he says. "It's best you don't stay here."

"All right," Linda says, seeming to snap out of a stupor. "Come on." She walks briskly to the newly discovered doorway and pulls it open. "Come on,

Audrey," she repeats. "Let's get down there before our cab gives up and leaves without us."

They are almost a whole flight down when they hear the door slam shut behind them. "How freaky was that guy?," Audrey asks. "And did you notice how cold that hallway was? I felt this weird gust of air across my back. It felt like fingers."

Blue Palace Hotel, Elevator #2

September 20, 10:45 a.m.

Ed looks at Tina. He raises a hand in front of his face, then presses it against the side of the elevator. It feels solid, yet...

"Look," he says to her. "Maybe you better tell me what's going on around here."

"You should know," Tina answers back.

Ed frowns. "Nice mouth, young lady." He thinks of his earlier recollection, walking through the silent laboratory staring down at his own motionless body. "Oh, my God," he says, horrified. "The experiment, it, it, it's worse than I realized. I'm still, still..." He can't think of the technical words the Orpheus Group uses. "I'm still outside of my body!"

"Whatever," Tina said. "The point is, you're dead—"

"You don't understand," Ed snaps. "I'm *not* dead. The experiment separated my spirit from my body, see, and I have to get back to it! Otherwise..." How long can his body live without his spirit inside? He knows there is a time limit, but the Orpheus instructors were always so vague.

He takes a deep breath. It's out there somewhere, he tells himself. Still in the pod, preserved by machines and chemicals. The words in the training pamphlet come back to him: *Waiting for you to return, like a vacationer coming back to his house.* "Something went wrong, somehow," he says. "I wandered off, but I just have to find my way back." He closes his eyes, trying to remember.

Then there are voices. "... you got a cigarette?" Two women are standing across the elevator car from him,

in front of the doors. A younger one—short hair, tailored business suit—and an older one—hair neatly pinned up, dressed in a skirt and blazer. “I’m on the patch,” the older woman says, her voice creased with irritation.

“Hello,” Ed gasps. Then louder: “Hello? Can you hear me?”

“Of course they can’t,” Tina tells him. “Don’t you know anything?”

The women continue their conversation, talking about lack of sleep, about a convention they’d attended. “It’s true,” Ed says. “I’m like...a ghost. Unreal to them.” He looks at Tina, who glares back at him. “But you can see me,” Ed says to her. “That means...”

“Please,” Ed says, louder, standing directly behind the two women now. “Can’t you hear me? I need help....”

The lights flicker and the elevator slams to a stop. The doors open, revealing a dimly lit hallway. “Fifth floor,” he hears one of the women say.

Fifth floor. Ed had noticed the indicator light, but hearing it said aloud sparks some sort of alarm in his mind. He stares at the two women and for exactly three seconds he sees them not as they are, waiting impatiently in the elevator, but in a dark hallway somewhere, screaming.

The older woman steps out of the elevator. “Stop!” Ed shouts. “Don’t get out!”

She pauses, as if she’d heard him. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” her friend answers.

“Don’t go out there,” Ed says to them.

The women have left the elevator and are walking down the hall.

Ed forces himself out of the elevator and into the circle of weak light given off by the only ceiling lamp. He glances backwards; Tina has followed and is watching him.

The corridor is dark, but not so dark that Ed can’t see the shapes that are waiting there. People, dozens of them, some standing like statues, others swaying slightly.

Ed moves closer and sees that the shadowy figures wear loose and ragged clothes of all sorts: long coats, bathrobes, shirts, gowns. The clothing hangs askew on their bodies, as if they were manikins, hurriedly dressed and not properly adjusted.

The two women are walking away from him, approaching the crowded corridor. Ed feels a cold blast of air wash over him, and even though it doesn't move a hair on either of the women's heads, he can't believe they don't feel it too. The women pause before a rope that's strung across the hallway at knee level. As they stand there, one of the shadowed figures moves forward, lurching closer to them in a slow, sleepwalking gait. The women talk with each other, glancing down the corridor as they speak, not reacting to the shape now almost at arm's length from them. The sleepwalker raises one arm, palm up, and begins curling its index finger in a grotesque parody of a "come here" gesture.

Now that it's closer to the light, Ed should be able to see its face.

But it has none.

Where there should be a nose, eyes, a mouth, there's only flesh. It has no ears, no hair, not even any indication that such things had once been present. Ed's stomach twists inside him. The only feature on the thing's head is a thick, black, scar-like ridge, crossed by smaller lines, as if stitched squarely in the center of the featureless visage. It runs from one side of the nonface to the other and is just slightly concave, like a faint grin.

"Smilers," Ed hears Tina whisper. The cockiness is gone from her voice.

He tries to move forward, but terror keeps him rooted to the spot. The older woman is about to step over the threshold, which will put her right in the arms of the waiting creature. Ed can see more of the monsters moving forward, slowly, their arms reaching.

"Oh God! Stop! Don't!" In his desperation, Ed pours every ounce of effort he can muster into his voice.

He feels himself push, not just with his throat, but his whole body. The air tightens around him, and then there is a great loosening, and it's as if he's passed through some sort of membrane.

"No, stop! Don't!" He repeats his cry. "Don't go down there, please," he shouts. "It's not safe!"

And then he sees that the women are looking at him. Right at him.

Everything is different. The light above him is brighter, almost blinding. The hallway is so dark he can barely see into it. His voice sounds fuller, richer, with the echoes he hadn't realized were missing.

The older of the two women is speaking to him. "Is there a problem?" she asks. She walks closer to him, looking annoyed. "Look, do you work here? Because that elevator's not working."

The colors around him are different. The floor, the walls, though still dull brown and gray, seem richer to Ed than they were mere moments ago. The light makes his eyes water. His mouth is dry. He stares at the women, then into the gloom behind them. It's dark, but he can dimly make out the shapes of the creatures he'd seen before. They are all massed together just beyond the rope, and are reaching out toward the women.

"This floor isn't safe. You need to get out of here." He pauses, trying to gather his thoughts. What can he tell them?

"Well, that's what we're trying to do," the woman says to him. She turns to her companion and they argue in hushed voices. The younger woman has moved close to the rope, and one of the faceless creatures reaches out and passes his fingers across her back.

Ed looks around. The elevator is closed. He feels fatigued, senses that whatever he's doing to hold himself in their attention will not last much longer. They have to leave the floor. But how?

Then he sees it. The door to the stairwell is just to the side of the elevator. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Had it been hidden?

"There," he shouts. "The stairwell's right there."

When they don't come forward, he steps back to give them an unobstructed path. The creatures are reaching their arms over the rope. Can they cross it? "Please," he begs. "It's best you don't stay here." Why won't the women move away?

"All right," the older woman says. "Come on." When the door closes behind the pair, Ed feels the air thicken around him. Tina is there; she takes him by the hand and walks him to the elevator.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement

September 20, 12:30 p.m.

"We've been waiting for you for some time, Mr. Lighthouse."

Ed crosses his arms. He had been so tired as Tina led him through a maze of back offices and storerooms and, finally, straight through a wall and down the narrow corridor behind it. But now, sitting in an overstuffed chair that feels stiff as stone, his energy is coming back to him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ed answers. This man, who Tina had introduced as Mr. Goodman, is one of the largest men Ed has ever seen. Fat, yes, but also built to a larger scale than most people. His boyish face is like the moon and his shoulders are broad as an oak tree. He could be anywhere between fifty and eighty, white-haired, but strong and robust. Though he's dressed simply in a pair of worker's overalls and a denim shirt, and though he smiles like a friendly uncle, he makes Ed nervous. *He's dead*, Ed thinks. *He's dead*.

"Look," Ed says, "Look, you've got to help me. I'm—"

"Mr. Lighthouse, do you know why you're here?" Goodman is seated across from Ed on a sagging sofa. He folds his sausage-like fingers in his lap.

"Like I've been trying to tell you, it's some kind of accident. The Orpheus Group, they were testing me, and the experiment—"

"You're here because this hotel isn't finished with you yet." Goodman pauses, looking down at Tina, who is sitting cross-legged on the floor and inspecting her doll's dress for rips. "I'll explain what I mean."

"Go ahead." Ed glances around the room, sees piles of newspapers, shelves of books, a coil of rope, a fire ax leaning in a corner, cardboard boxes with dented corners, jars of dark liquid with darker shapes floating inside. He imagines his own body suspended in a giant tube of formaldehyde somewhere, slowly dissolving into nothing. "It's about time somebody explained something."

"I wish you could have met all the fascinating souls who used to dwell in this house, Mr. Lighthouse. Such history." Goodman's eyes grow distant. "In the basement, there was a crazy medicine man named Crooked-Foot, leading a group of his braves in search of vanished trails. And poor Jane Brown, the trapper's wife, she used to wander the third floor, searching for her starved children. The streams of blood from her slashed wrists trailed behind her like pretty red ribbons. The newlyweds who had OD'd on heroin lay together on the king-sized bed in room 715, picking the insects off each other's skin...."

Ed can only stare at him.

"They're all gone now, Mr. Lighthouse. Taken away by a dark storm that blew through this house years ago, or dragged away by the things that came soon after. I was one lucky survivor; Tina, here, was another."

Goodman glances at Tina, who nods intently back at him. "The living who come and go here, well, they never noticed the difference, of course." He leans forward, and Ed finds himself doing the same. "But the house noticed, Mr. Lighthouse." His voice is nearly a whisper. "After centuries of accommodating the deceased, the house just did not like being so empty. It craved the deep vibrations of the dead, their sighs and the trace of their fingertips across the walls. It needed them."

"Skip the boring parts," Tina sighs.

Goodman chuckles. "I'm sorry, friends. I'm not an educated man, but I do have the gift of gab. You're Irish, aren't you? You understand. The thing is, Mr. Lighthouse, need is a terrible thing. It makes you vulnerable. The house's need became a sort of gravity, a kind of spiritual stickiness, let's say. And so those who died under this roof, or near this building, found it hard to leave. Even those who hadn't visited in years turned up here after passing on. But it turns out our house's craving has reached farther than any of us knew." He nods in agreement with himself. "Something else heard the signal, something, I think, neither dead nor alive. Something that had been searching for just such an opportunity, or invitation, or flaw. Carefully, slowly, but relentlessly, it pushed its way toward the house. It slipped a single tentacle through the door of our desire, as it were, and now it is pulling the rest of its bulk closer and closer. The door can't be closed, and this thing can't be reasoned with. It will use the house, and everyone inside, for its own purposes."

"Those things... those faceless things."

"Indeed, Mr. Lighthouse. The smilers, as Tina calls them, are invaders, predators, and they've been slowly making this place their own. They're turning it into something else. Something that suits them more than us." He rubs his hands against his pant legs, then turns them palms up. "Incidentally, I have to apologize for these stains on my hands. It's just red paint. I used it so often in life, and it left stains that won't fade."

Ed sees no stains on Goodman's meaty hands, but says nothing.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 527

July 17, 11:37 p.m., Four Years Ago

Tina wakes in the middle of the night and she can't see. Something in the air is making her eyes itch and sting. The room is very hot. There is a roaring sound in her ears. She tries to cry out, but her throat is so dry that all she can do is cough. Someone is yelling. Her father?

It's hard to breathe. She tries to sit up, then falls back and curls into a ball, coughing, shaking.

Then she is awake again. She is standing next to her bed, dressed in her favorite outfit, and the room is silent. Everything seems black-tinged and covered in soot. The blankets and pillows are gone, the bed has collapsed, the carpet is scorched and smoldering. Strips of wallpaper hang from the walls like torn skin. Tina sees that there is another little girl lying in her bed, her hair burned away, her skin mottled with black blisters and dark red ooze. She turns away in bewilderment.

She feels something tug at her foot. Tina looks down and sees a bundle of fabric, a tiny hand, a foot. Bending down, she picks up the doll and holds it in front of her. The dress is white, trimmed in pink. The doll's hair is gone, and its face is a half-melted sag. Tina crouches and sticks her pinky in a pile of ash; she traces two circles across the doll's face, marks a petite nose, and then adds an almost-horizontal line for a mouth.

"What's your name?" she says. She's startled by the sound of her own voice. She pulls the doll close to her, hugging it. "Your name is Franny," she says without deliberating the matter. "Franny." She feels the doll's arms hug her shoulder.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement **September 20, 12:57 p.m.**

Ed shifts his position, as if he's about to stand. "I don't have time to listen to all this," he says. "Please, I have to—"

"Well, now, time is exactly what I need to speak to you about," Goodman says. "It's the meat of the matter, as my daddy used to say. You see, Ed—may I call you Ed? You see, Ed, time is not what we think it is." He rises from the sofa, walks across the room, pauses so his huge frame blocks the doorway. "Think of time as being like this hotel. It has an overall architecture, but you can never see all of it at once. So most of us move from room to room, from moment to moment. Starting in the basement, say, and ending at the top floor, never going backwards, never

skipping over the next room in the sequence. But imagine if you could move freely through the corridors, from one room to another, one floor to another, re-visiting some spaces, skipping ahead to others."

Ed sees another exit, a smaller doorway flanked on either side by a sagging bookcase and an empty hat rack. "I just need to find a telephone," he says. "Somehow, I need to get someone's attention, ask them to make a phone call, okay?"

Goodman ignores him. "Death brings us gifts, you see. Some of us gain the gift to peer into other moments, other rooms, if you will. To steal a look around the corners of time. I've done this, and when I do, forwards or backwards, I see you standing there. And I see you looking back at me, and past me, into some dark corner my eyes can't quite pierce. Some deep nook that holds the key to everything."

Ed is shaking his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your father was a tall fellow, thick mustache, red hair and walked with a slight limp? Your mother favored green blouses and cracked her knuckles when she was nervous? This was a while ago, but am I right?"

Ed stands, balls his fists as Goodman smiles at him. "How do you know that? Tell me how you knew that!"

"Tell us what happened when you were seven, Mr. Lighthouse. Tell us about that." He points to the scar on Ed's neck.

"I... I don't remember much about it..."

"You know how it happened, don't you?"

"It—it was a dog. My parents told me a dog attacked me, almost killed me."

"Where did this happen?"

"I can't remember. We—we moved around a lot until I was ten, my father had trouble finding work..."

"It happened here, Mr. Lighthouse. It happened in the courtyard behind this hotel. Your mother and father worked here then. I remember them, even without peeking around time's corners. Your parents were nice people."

Ed's eyes are watering. "They died when I was twelve. Six months apart. My father—well, he drank himself to death. My mother... cancer." Ed found he was sitting in the chair again.

"I miss my mom and dad too, Mr. Lighthouse," Tina says. "But they're coming back to get me some day. Maybe yours will come back too."

"It's okay, Eddie," Goodman says. "You see, you have a connection here, just like we all do." Goodman smiles. He chuckles a bit. "Why spend eternity wandering about when you can stay at a fine hotel? I saw that you'd be joining us, but I have to confess that I was starting to wonder if you'd get here in time."

"No!" Ed shouts.

Tina squeals, startled, and Goodman says, "It's all right, honey."

Ed turns away from them. "I'm not dead, don't you get it? I'm not staying here! I don't belong here." He stomps away, passing through the smaller doorway, then realizes this wasn't the way he entered. He stops short, and feels the breath die away from him as he sees what's around him.

The room is filled with bones.

It's like the pictures of catacombs he'd seen once in *National Geographic*. Leg bones neatly stacked against the wall. A pyramid of skulls. Shelves with finger bones laid out in rows like an butterfly collection. And in one corner, a pile of clothing, men's suits, ladies' dresses, shoes, eyeglasses, wristwatches.

"My little hobby," Goodman's voice comes. "The reason I had to seal off this area in the first place. I was the only custodian back then. Nobody used to come down here but me, so nobody realized these rooms had been hidden." He sighs, and turns his face away when Ed looks at him. "It's not that I ever wanted to hurt anyone, Eddie. Heck, I hate to see people get hurt. That was my problem, you see. Now and again I'd run into people living their lives in such misery that I couldn't take it. They needed someone who could put them out

of their pain.” He stares at his hands, turning them over and back again.

“I got a little sloppy after a while. Had to hide out in here for years. One night I had a heart attack and, well...” He turns his face to Ed again. A tear is visible on one puffed cheek. “Those are mine over there.” Ed sees a nearly-complete skeleton sprawled out alone in a far corner of the room, tangled up in overalls and a flannel shirt. Ed shifts his attention from one part of the room to another, finally resting his eyes on Goodman.

“I told you need is a terrible thing,” Goodman whispers.

Blue Palace Hotel, Lobby, Concierge Desk September 20, 3:00 p.m.

“How can I help you?” Amy pushes her lips into a smile as the middle-aged couple approaches the desk, but inside she’s cursing. The pair has a look in their eyes that she’s come to know all too well, a glint of outrage combined with smoldering annoyance.

“My wife and I—oww!” The man puts a hand to his right ear; Amy sees that he’s wearing a hearing aid.

He pulls the hearing aid out. “Damn it, I never have problems with this, but ever since we checked in here it’s going crazy. What do you have running around here that would be interfering with it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t speak to that,” Amy answers. She doesn’t add that her own radio has been periodically interrupted with bursts of strange static all day, nor that several other guests and staff have made similar complaints. “But I’ll look into it.”

“The voice keeps saying, ‘Or feed us,’” the man tells his wife. “They’ve got something around here causing interference and I bet it’s illegal. I have a friend who works for the Federal Communications Commission, and I have a good mind to have him come down to this dump and find out what’s going on!” He jabs the hearing aid at Amy like a weapon; its flesh-colored contours make it look like some sort of mutated ear.

It's all Amy can do not to tell the man to shove his hearing aid up his ass. She notices, from the corner of her eye, that someone else is waiting for her attention. Relieved, she smiles sweetly and says, "Sir, I promise I'll look into it for you. And, if there's nothing else I can do for you right now...?"

"You haven't done anything for us," the man barks.

His wife pulls at his arm. "All right, Henry, let's just go get something to eat. Brad and Cynthia will be waiting at the restaurant."

Amy can't help listening to their conversation as they walk away. "I told you," the woman says, "We should have taken Brad's offer and stayed at his house. Why can't you be nicer to your only son-in-law?"

"Because he's a snake," the man answers, his voice too loud, and then his wife shushes him and they're out of earshot.

Amy sighs. Then she remembers her other guest, puts on her smile, turns aside and finds nobody there. She had seen a tallish man, causally dressed, and though she'd only glimpsed him for a second, she thought he had a desperate expression on his face. But now there's no one. She looks up and down the lobby, but there are no other guests in sight, no one at all except for someone from housekeeping vacuuming near the elevator doors.

Blue Palace Hotel, Lobby, Concierge Desk **September 20, 3:00 p.m.**

It all looks so normal, Ed thinks. He approaches the front desk warily, feeling exposed, but there is no sign of the ragged smilers, or the great black canine monster. A man carrying a heavy suitcase passes by him, whistling softly. Nearby, a maid unwinds the cord of a vacuum cleaner. He can see the glass wall that faces the street, and through it, the cars passing by.

Ed is standing next to an elderly couple whose agitated voices make him flinch. He places his hands on the desk and closes his eyes. He tries to remember

the sensations he felt outside the elevator, when he'd made his presence known to the two women. The feeling of the air thickening around him, sounds becoming sharper, his body becoming heavier. The desk under his fingertips starts to gain texture and warmth. The voices near him gain timber and overtones.

Ed feels a puff of fresh air flow around him as someone walks into the lobby from outside. He can smell the rancid breath of the matron standing near him, coffee mixed with alcohol and phlegm. The girl behind the desk pauses for a second as she argues with the man—he's waving some small object in front of her face. She glances in Ed's direction, makes eye contact, and acknowledges him with an eyebrow.

And then the brighter world rises away from him. The gloom of almost-death is more apparent now than ever.

Ed's mind is fogged with fatigue, and he sinks to his knees and wonders if it's possible for a spirit to pass out. He's dimly aware of people walking away from the desk, of the concierge making a tired sigh. A vacuum cleaner hums in the background. The idea of standing up, let alone trying to reach out to the living again, makes him want to collapse.

It would be so good to rest....

When a pair of hands catches him and pulls him up, he's too tired to care.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement September 20, 3:35 p.m.

Tina looks to Franny, hoping the doll will give her some clue as to what to say, but receives no answer. Finally, she says softly, "Mr. Goodman? What's going to happen now?"

Goodman rubs Tina's head. "Don't you worry, honey. We'll figure some way to make a pie out of this rhu-barb."

"But mister Lighthouse left and said he wouldn't help us."

"I know, sweetie. I think I may have made a mistake in telling him so much so quickly."

"Then what are we going to do? Because so many smilers are around, I'm afraid they're going to find this room soon too. There won't be many other places to hide. I don't want to end up on the fifth floor."

"Neither do I, Tina."

"But what are we doing to do? Can't you go after him and talk him into helping us?"

"You know I don't leave my rooms, Tina."

"But if you don't, the smilers are going to do something very very bad!" She's shouting now. "And I think everyone will die!"

Blue Palace Hotel, Lobby September 20, 3:35 p.m.

Ed is on his feet. His head is woozy, but some of the fatigue has left him. He steadies himself. He turns to face whoever it is that picked him up off the floor.

"Are you all right?"

Ed can't place the voice at first, familiar though it is. "I think so," he says, then rubs his eyes, then his temples, feeling the fog lift from his thoughts. "I just wore myself out for a moment. But..." He realizes that he's talking to the woman in the elegant gown, the one he'd met in the hallway... how long ago had that been? "It's you again." He stares, realizing the implications of being able to communicate with her.

She frowns. "My name is Victoria Blake. There's no need to stare so rudely. Yes, as you've probably figured out by now, I am dead. Just like you, young man."

Not like me, Ed thinks, as he nods slowly. "Young man?" he says. "You don't look much older than me, if you don't mind me saying."

She frowns. "You are new around here, aren't you? I may have died as a wizened old crone, but that doesn't mean I have to look like one for all eternity."

Ed realizes that he doesn't want to understand what she's trying to tell him. "Well, Victoria, thanks for

helping me up. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He fixes his attention over her shoulder, toward the lobby's glass doors and the street scene beyond them. "It's time for me to get the hell out of this madhouse." He starts walking, purposefully, gradually picking up speed until the doors are just in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she calls.

Ed ignores her and walks right through the first set of doors, barely flinching. A doorman stands in the small antechamber, waiting by the outer doors. "Don't bother, I've got it," Ed mutters sarcastically to him. He reaches with one arm and passes it through the door.

And feels something push back.

Ed moves closer and sees that his hand is actually through the glass, but just beyond he feels a solid barrier that won't yield. He pushes with both hands, but can move no further.

"It won't work." Victoria comes up beside him. "I've tried it a hundred times, not just here, but all around the building. Even up on the roof. You can't get through. Don't you see that brown nonsense blocking the way?"

Ed stares through the door. He can see now that there's a kind of smoke just behind the glass door, a sooty haze thinner in some places than others. It's this substance that his hands are pressed against. Though it looks as insubstantial as fog, it feels as solid and unyielding as iron.

"Damn it!" Ed pulls away from the door, and stomps past Victoria back into the lobby. "Damn it! I can't stay here! I have to get back! Why am I here?"

When he finishes, Victoria speaks in a calm, almost bored, tone. "If you're through with your little tantrum, maybe you'll listen to what I have to say." He blinks at her. "I happen to know this hotel very well," she tells him. "I should. Lord knows I lived here long enough when—well, when I lived. In any case, darling..." She seems to reach for something at her hip, then sighs. "I wish I had my bag, I would kill for a cigarette right now.

In any case, there is a way out. There are tunnels—steam tunnels, utility shafts—down in the basement. They lead away from the hotel and up to street level.”

Ed stares out the lobby doors, then looks back at Victoria. “Are you serious?” he says slowly. “Tunnels? Are you sure?”

“Dead serious, pun intended. I haven’t yet tried them because there are so many of those ghastly stitch-faced people down there. But between the two of us, I think we can get past them. You’re the first one I’ve met who seems to have the wherewithal to do it.”

Ed stares at her, processes this for a moment. Then he says, “Orpheus. Have you heard of Orpheus? Have you heard anyone mention Orpheus?”

“I’m sure I haven’t, darling.” She crosses her arms and taps one foot slowly. “Well,” she asks, “Shall we go?”

They go.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement

September 20, 3:47 p.m.

“No sign yet of those appalling creatures,” Victoria whispers, looking over her shoulder to see Ed following. “Let’s hope our luck holds out.”

“Sure,” Ed hisses back. “And what exactly are we supposed to do if we do find one?” The thought of encountering a smiler in the cramped passageway makes him dizzy.

“Just follow my lead, darling,” Victoria answers. “Now hush. We’re getting close.”

The narrow corridor ends and they’re in a wider hallway. Ed steps up next to Victoria. “Listen,” Ed says softly. “If we can somehow just make contact with the outside world, I can get some help and... what the hell?”

Ed’s hand brushes one of the walls, and the cold nearly burns his skin. He jerks his hand away and sees that it’s trailing some sort of gummy adhesive. He touches a fingertip lightly to the wall, and pulls back.

There's a cold, paste-like substance all over his finger. "What is this?"

"Let's keep going, darling," Victoria says. "I know all of this must seem frightfully grotesque. But take my word, compared to certain other kinds of unpleasantness, it's just Halloween decoration." She's walking faster now. Ed keeps his attention on the walls as she draws away from him. The viscous coating is thicker here. Ed can see shapes embedded within the slime. "Hold it a second," he whispers. He moves closer to examine the shadowy forms in the wall. One of the shapes resembles a human hand, but flattened like a glove. Further down the wall is a vaguely leg-shaped form, and elsewhere a suggestion of a foot.

"Holy cow," he whispers. They're nearing the end of the passageway, where it appears to turn a corner. Ed watches an arm-shape, and near it a torso. The two are slowly moving toward each other. A thin thread stretches from one to the other. Ed watches as the line contracts, slowly pulling the arm and shoulder together. A second line appears, like a black thread, reaching from arm to shoulder. It's as if something's stitching them together.

"Victoria—"

As Ed approaches the corner, Victoria screams. "No! Oh God, they're here! Help me—" He sees a dark shape grab her by the neck, pulling her out of sight.

"Victoria!" Ed runs toward her, rounding the corner. There's another long hallway, with an open door at the far end. Two of the blank-faced smilers have her; they're dragging her by the arms and are already halfway down the hall.

"Help me! Oh, God, they've got me! Help me!"

Ed runs after them, but his feet seem to move in slow motion while the smilers, without seeming to hurry, outpace him and pass through the doorway. He registers dimly that there are more shapes in the walls around him: arms, legs, feet, heads—all flattened out like sewing patterns, swimming slowly toward each

other, groping for each other. The air is intensely cold. The floor beneath his feet feels uneven, lumpy. Victoria's shrieks echo strangely.

He passes through a door and into a room in which every corner, every angle seems to be distorted and askew. The floor is tilted. Two smilers hold Victoria between them while a third places its hands on her head. A gray arm skitters across the floor, its fingers wriggling like insect legs, and oozes into a wall.

"Help me, Ed. Please," Victoria moans.

Ed steps toward the smilers, afraid he'll slip if he moves too quickly across the slick floor. He feels himself smoldering with helplessness, and this makes him angry. He's tired of fear.

"Stop," he says aloud. It's as if something inside him is speaking through him. "Stop!" A force from his chest, he can feel it move through his throat and push itself out his mouth. His voice bounces through the room like thunder. The three monsters raise their blind faces toward him, then fall back as if struck. Victoria slips to the floor, catching herself on her hands and knees.

"Stop!" Ed shouts again, feeling the power release, a bit weaker this time. The smilers scurry away to a far corner. Ed reaches Victoria in careful steps, helps her to her feet.

"Can you walk?" he asks, keeping his attention on the smilers. They're crouching, motionless, their hands splayed out in front of them for protection.

Victoria doesn't answer him; she's leaning on him for support. Ed glances down at her. Her long black hair has fallen from its arrangement and is spread around her head and shoulders.

"Are you alright?" he asks her. "Are you hurt?"

Suddenly she pushes her body upright and throws her head toward him like a snake. Her lips press against his Adam's apple and his entire throat is gripped in ice. The pain makes his eyes water, and now it's he who must lean on her to remain upright. The numbness

spreads quickly through his body and she lowers him to the ground almost tenderly.

"Shhh," Victoria says, pulling away from his throat and then stroking his hair. "No need to speak. I don't want you to hurt any more of my children." Ed feels his lips moving, but no sound comes out.

"You've been quite the distraction, young man," she says, standing over him. Ed can't feel his arms or legs. "I thought you might have been something of power sent against me, but I see you're just a spirit with a bit more volition than most. No matter. There's so much to be done, and you'll make excellent food."

Ed makes a gurgling noise.

"Why?" Victoria . "Because the strong devour the weak. It's the only law that continues beyond death."

Reading, Pennsylvania, Downtown

February 11, 12:43 a.m., Seven Months Ago

The streets are empty, devoid of most traffic this late on a weeknight. The fog gives a halo to each streetlamp. Ed speeds up as he turns onto Adams Boulevard, wanting to get home and put this night behind him. Ed feels as if his car is traveling down an endless tunnel of mist. After weeks of cajoling and prodding, he finally convinced that half-pretty substitute teacher to meet him for a drink. She stood him up, and now he's horny and lonely. He misses his ex-wife and tells himself tomorrow he'll call her, even though she's told him not to, even though the sound of her voice will leave him depressed for days.

Something is in the road, a dark shape against the fog, and Ed just has time to take a breath as he pushes down the brake pedal. It's like a carnival ride as the car swerves and spins across the slick pavement, the anti-lock breaks failing. Over the course of three seconds, Ed tumbles through constellations of streetlights and neon signs smeared into stars by the foggy air. And somewhere, silhouetted against the light, is a dark animal shape, a black creature with yellow fangs and a blood red tongue. Was it lunging at him? Then the car

slams into the bus stop, a symphony of breaking glass and twisting metal and screams.

University of Pittsburgh, North Side Campus November 21, 7:33 p.m., Seventeen Years Ago

Ed opens his eyes and finds himself in a cramped room filled with mismatched couches and chairs. A television is on, but the sound is turned down. he tries to sit up. His head aches. He looks around the room and sees he's not alone.

Three young men are sprawled on the sofas and chairs. "Mike," he whispers. "Mike, Dave, Jim..." They're dead already, asphyxiated by the carbon monoxide that has been seeping into their room from a defective furnace. Ed rolls off the couch and onto the floor, barely feeling the impact. *I can't help them*, he thinks. *I have to get out.* The floor seems to be tilting and he crawls, almost swimming, pushing himself toward a window.

He looks back at his roommates, lying motionless. A dark figure moves among them, an animal shape crouched low, sniffing first one of them, then the others, then fixing its eyes on Ed.

Blue Palace Hotel, Back Courtyard May 27, 10:13 a.m., Thirty Years Ago

Ed is running down the hall. He is seven years old, chubby and frightened, outside in the cold courtyard, running over cracked cement. He looks behind him and sees the dog, ragged and terrible, yellow teeth and gray claws. Ed cries out, tries to run faster, then he feels the terrible impact knock him down. "I'm sorry," he blubbers. "Don't hurt me!" The dog is above him, its mouth dripping, and before Ed can scream, it clamps down on his face and neck, teeth ripping into his cheeks, blood running down his throat.

Street Outside the Blue Palace Hotel September 20, 8:00 p.m.

Terrence watches in disbelief.

The murky aura around the hotel has thickened. It now extends at least twenty yards away from the building, forcing him to move back to the curb. What's more, there are *things* moving inside it. They walk like people, wear torn and ill-fitting clothing. But their faces are gone, replaced by naked flesh marked only by a single, stitched-up scar.

Fascinated, Terrence moves closer. The things are not alive, that much is obvious to his discerning eye. And yet they don't appear to be dead souls either. He watches as one takes up a position beside the doorman, placing a gloved hand on the shoulder of the oblivious doorkeeper. Another follows three women as they walk into the atrium. Indeed, any living person who goes through the hotel doors picks up such a follower. The rest move slowly back and forth through the muddy cloud that swathes the hotel. Their sluggish wanderings seem purposeful, but they don't appear to be doing anything.

Terrence raises the old army radio again and speaks. The radio transmits to a broadcast station and from there into the great net of radio waves that carry his voice around the world. "I don't know what these things are," he says. "But from what I hear, they're dangerous. If anyone is in the area, watch out for—"

He feels a hand clamp around his wrist, another around his neck. Three more of the faceless creatures swarm around him, pulling him off his feet. He struggles, cursing, swearing at himself for assuming the creatures couldn't penetrate the barrier that had foiled him. Then he realizes that they're bringing him into the hotel. He passes right through the brown cloud and it seems no more solid than air.

Orpheus Facility #6, Level 4, Undisclosed Location September 20, 6:13 a.m.

There is a low rumble. Ed feels his legs buckling, then realizes the floor is moving. There are rattling sounds as pens and staplers and CD-ROMs fall off the

tables and work stations. When the seconds of motion have stopped, Ed hears the wailing of alarms from somewhere outside the room.

And then, another sound. A guttural tremor.

It's the growl of an animal. It's close. Ed steps away from the pod, from his own comatose flesh and bones, and as he does so a dark shape slides into view from the opposite side. It walks on four legs and holds its head low to the ground. Its muzzle is partly open, revealing gray teeth like spikes. It has the shape and proportions of an alley dog, skeletal with hunger but taut and muscular. One ear is partly bitten off. Its red eyes drip black mucous. And it's bigger than any breed of dog could be—bigger than a wolf, nearly big as a horse.

Ed can't move. Fear turns his muscles to glass. "What do I do," he says aloud. "What do I do? Somebody tell me...."

The thing pads toward Ed as if it has all the time in the world. He feels waves of hatred emanating from it like heat.

"Oh, God," Ed whispers. "Oh no."

There is a tremendous crash like amplified thunder, and the floor shakes again. Dust falls from the ceiling. A door flies open. Flashes of heat. Smoke. People screaming.

Blue Palace Hotel, Fifth Floor, East Hallway September 20, 10:00 p.m.

Ed is bleeding, teeth like scalpels ripping into his throat, tearing through muscle and skin and bone, yet impossibly the moment never ends. There's only more and more pain, and he's screaming, and he pushes at the monster but it won't be moved, and the terrible growling is shaking his body apart. Stab, rip, bleed, pain...

Until he opens his eyes.

A man stands over him, a stranger, holding his wrist, pulling him to his feet. He's young, with a shaved

head, dark skin and devil's goatee. "Damn, but you were in some kind of serious trance, mister."

Ed raises a hand to his throat. But there's no blood. "I... was I dreaming?"

"You were doing something. But I got you out of it. Now keep your voice down."

Ed looks around. It seems that the fog in his dream vision was real, if nothing else was. A thick mist swirls around him. He can barely make out the figures moving in the distance. "Where am I?" he whispers.

"I'm not exactly sure," the stranger says in low tones. "I played possum and they dumped me in here. I could feel them hammering me with some kind of mind-whack, but I got ways to hold off that kind of junk."

Now Ed can hear other sounds. Moans, sobs, groans, muffled yet near. A man-sized shadow moves near him, its arms waving slowly in the air. He sees its tattered shirt and the dark slash across its face. "Oh God," he whispers. "We're on the fifth floor."

The stranger takes a careful step away from Ed. "Come on," he says. "If we move slow and keep our voices down, they don't seem to notice us. By the way, the name's Green."

Ed's eyes adjust to the gloom as they walk. He sees that they are surrounded by others spirits. Some stand in place or wander in slow circles, but most are curled on the floor, their bodies quivering, their faces twisted into masks of fear. He sees a teenager lying on her back, her eyes bugging out and her hands clutching at her throat. A bald man dressed as a waiter is kneeling with his arms thrown in front of his face, begging an unseen assailant to stop striking him, his pleas interrupted by screams of pain. A stout woman is curled into a fetal position, whispering, "Take it away, take it away, take it away." And among the damned souls walk the smilers, occasionally laying a palm upon a victim, causing that soul to cry out even more.

Green's face is impassive. "I think I see the end of the hall up there," he whispers.

"You're the voice on the speaker," Ed suddenly realizes. "Are you from Orpheus?"

"I'm the voice on everybody's speaker," Green answers. "And I wouldn't expect to hear from Orpheus for a while if I were you. Hold on." They stop as a smiler moves near them, then passes by. Ed can make out the edge of a wall to his right. The fog seems to be thinning. There's a lit area a few yards in front of them. Ed squints... yes, further back, there are the elevator doors.

He opens his mouth to tell Green, when several dark shapes emerge from the wall to their left. Ed and Green back away, and Ed makes out four smilers bearing a woman by her shoulders and feet. She wears a white garment that's vivid against the gray shapes of the smilers. He watches them lower her to the floor. When her body touches the rug, she slumps lifelessly, her head lolls over and Ed can see her face.

"Oh no." Ed sees the straw hair, recognizes the nurse's uniform. "Oh, no."

Two of the smilers walk away, and a third places a hand against the woman's forehead. Almost immediately, she sits up. She places her right hand in her lap, then moves her left hand down the inside of her right forearm.

"Shit, look at that." Ed hears Green hiss. The woman's motion leaves a dark line across her arm. She repeats the motion with her other hand. Ed sees tears pouring down the woman's face, hears her whimper as the lines on her arms began to ooze blood. He realizes that the nurse has positioned herself in almost the exact pose she'd held in the bathtub.

"No," Ed says suddenly. "I won't let this happen." He walks toward her.

"Hey," Green whispers. "Hey, what are you doing? Don't call attention to yourself."

Ed sees her make the slashing motions again, sees more wounds appear on her skin. From the corner of his eye he can see a smiler turn in his direction.

Ed crouches next to her. He grabs her hands. "Stop," he says. "Stop what you're doing! You don't have to do this!"

She cries out, pulling her hands away from him. Ed wraps his fingers around hers and feels sharp, cold metal slice across his palm. He pulls the scalpel from her grasp.

She starts clawing at her wounds with her fingernails, gasping in pain. Ed looks up. Three smilers are now moving steadily toward them, picking their way around the suffering spirits. Green is nowhere in sight.

He looks at the nurse. He sees her name tag. "Karen," he says. "Karen, listen to me. You can snap out of this. I did it. You can do it. Listen to me."

She pulls her hands away from him. Somehow, the scalpel is no longer in his grip; she scrapes its edge across her wrist. "No!" he cries out. He pulls it from her—it's slick with blood and easy to wrest away. "Look," he shouts. "Look!" And he plunges the scalpel into his belly, just below his rib cage.

The pain makes his vision pulse in and out, but he sees Karen raise her head, stare into his face. She reaches for him, pulls out the scalpel. She presses her palms against his wound. "Pressure bandage," she calls out. "I need a pressure bandage here! Somebody!"

Ed pushes his legs underneath him, forces himself to his feet. Karen must do the same to keep her hands against his injury. "What do you think you're doing," she demands. "You have to lie down! You need to stay in place until an ambulance gets here!"

"It's okay," he says softly. "It's going to be fine." His pain is easing. Karen looks down. The blood on her hands, on his shirt, is gone. Gingerly, she pulls her hand away from his abdomen. There's no wound, not even a rip in his shirt. "I don't understand," she says.

"We'll tell you about it later," comes Green's voice. He puts a hand on her shoulder, and one on Ed's. "I almost got snared by those damn things again. Come one, we need to get out of—"

It's too late. Five smilers have moved to block their exit, and several more are shuffling around them. They're surrounded.

"Get away," Ed shouts toward them, pulling the energy from his chest. A few stagger backwards, but more move up to take their place.

"You got the Voice," Green says. "That's good. Orpheus teach you how to use it?"

"What is going on?" Karen asks. "What have I been doing?"

"I'm sorry," Ed tells her. "I thought I could get you out of here, but..."

One of the smilers falls over. Another tumbles next to him. There's a huge shape in the fog, and then Ed sees Goodman. The large man swings a fire ax and another smiler goes down.

"Don't just stand there, folks. Exit's this way."

They run.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement

September 20, 10:36 p.m.

Tina can't wait any longer.

Mr. Goodman told her to stay in his room until he got back, but she started feeling uneasy almost as soon as he left. She's certain it's better to stay on the move, that sooner or later the smilers will find this place.

"Maybe I shouldn't have yelled at him, Franny," she says to the doll's uneven face. "He told me once it would be real bad if he ever left his rooms. If something happens to him I won't have any friends left but you."

She stares at the doll for a few seconds, then nods. "You're right, Franny. I don't like it here either. Let's go."

Tina is almost at the stairwell when the smilers come at her, pouring from the walls, the floor, the

ceiling. Their hands clamp around her and are cold as ice. "Please let me go," she whimpers, but she feels herself being lifted and carried. Blank, stitched-up faces are everywhere. Finally the movements stop and there's someone standing before her, a tall lady with fancy hair and a long dress.

"Well, what have we here?" Her voice is mean-sounding and makes Tina try to pull herself loose, but the smilers hold fast to her arms and legs and waist. "A bright little light to be snuffed out?" Tina tightens her grip on her doll.

"No need to bring this one to the fifth floor, children," the lady says. "We'll take her right to the furnace room."

"Leave me alone!" Tina makes herself shout. She tried to sound fearless, but she knows her voice is shaking. "Let me go!"

"Hush, child," the woman coos. She leans forward as if to kiss her.

Tina closes her eyes. And then the lady screams.

"NO! NO! NO!" The lady backs away from Tina, throwing her hands over her face. "Get away from me!" she shrieks, and the smilers drop Tina and stand there, shaking.

Tina bolts, running, feeling Franny's hand squeezing hers.

**Blue Palace Hotel, Fifth Floor, East Hallway
September 20, 10:40 p.m.**

"There," Ed shouts. "If we cross that rope, they won't follow!"

He takes Karen's hand and they sprint down the hallway. Green follows and Goodman, in the rear, walking backwards to face the smilers. The creatures pace them, but don't move closer.

Goodman keeps his ax at the ready. "Something's happened to them," he calls. "They stopped walking, they're just standing there quivering."

"We're almost there," Ed calls. "I don't see any on this end." He steps over the rope, joining Karen, who'd already crossed. "We're clear! Hurry!"

"It ain't no thing, man," Green says. He crosses the rope, then watches Goodman do the same. "The freaks have stopped chasing us." It was true; Ed sees the hoard standing impassively, their arms twitching at their sides.

Karen puts a hand on Ed's shoulder. "Look, I really need to know what's going on here. What's happened to the hotel? Who are you people?" Her eyes narrow; she stares at the scar on Ed's neck. "Haven't—haven't we met? Were you—in my room?"

Ed turns to Green. "Go ahead," Green tells him. "But try not to overwhelm her."

Ed clears his throat. "Karen," he said, "What's the last thing you can remember?"

She frowns. "I—was—I decided to come here one last time. Because Victoria was dead, and they sent me some of her things, and..."

"Wait," Ed interrupts. "Not—Victoria Lake?"

"Yes, that's right." She blinked at him, confused. "I was her nurse for the last fifteen years. She owned this hotel, she died in the fire."

"But—"

Green cuts Ed off. "Let her talk, man."

"I took care of her for fifteen years," Karen is saying. Her voice cracks and her eyes are welling up. "She told me so many stories about this place, about the parties she used to throw. She used to say I was like a daughter to her. Oh, God..."

Karen is sobbing now. Ed takes her shoulders. "Take your time," he says.

"They sent me her diaries and I read what she did. All those times she'd cried to me, how sorry she was that she never had any children..." Karen sniffs, regains some composure. "I couldn't tell anyone, couldn't ruin her name, and after awhile I just couldn't live with the secret. So I came back here to... oh God." She looks

around her, as if seeing Ed and the others for the first time. "I did it," she whispers. "I went through with it, didn't I?"

"You did, honey," Goodman says finally.

**Blue Palace Hotel, Basement, Old Furnace Room
September 20, 11:17 p.m.**

The great, dead furnace was pulled from service a half-century ago; too big to be carried out of the basement, it lies on its side like a rusting whale. Victoria lays down next to it. She leans her torso against it, feeling its cool, cool metal against her skin. "I'm sorry," she whispers, letting her voice carry into the furnace and down, down, down into the sweet, cold infinite. "Talk to me again. Please."

A creaking, like fatigued metal, seems to echo from somewhere inside the furnace's shell. In Victoria's mind, words form: *NOT WORTHY*.

"No," she moans. "No, please. I won't fail you. I was—I was frightened. There's something here that scares me. I saw it and I didn't know what it was. In my panic, I pushed your voice away from my mind..."

Again there is an echoing, and the sound resolves itself into a word. *OBEY*.

She nods rapidly, pushing her face against the frigid metal, pressing her fingers to it. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I will obey. The deed is almost done. Your grandchildren will soon be legion here."

AND THE LIVING?

"Our plans are nearly complete. The anguish of the dead is being stirred into the thoughts of the living, as you command. And by tonight every soul here will have its doppelganger, filling their heads with your voice. The symphony of pain will reach a fever pitch, and this place will become an extension of your halloved form."

The fire door in the center of the furnace swings open. The shadows in the walls twitch excitedly. Victoria feels the cold air that flows out of the furnace's

icy depths. It sweeps across her face, stinging it with a thousand tiny needles. She cries out, throwing her hands to her face. When it's over she stands slowly, moaning softly, not understanding at first what has been done to her.

Blue Palace Hotel, Fifth Floor, East Hallway September 20, 11:23 p.m.

"We need to get off this floor," Green says. "Those things are starting to stir again. I'm not convinced they won't step across that rope."

"Wait," Ed says. "This is important. This woman Victoria, she's the one who put me here in the first place. She was ordering those smilers around like subjects."

"She's their queen, then" Goodman mutters. "My boy, she's the key. Somehow..." He grins, patting the handle of the ax he carries. "Oh. So soon. I must say it feels good to be walking these halls one last time. In any case, you're on the right track, Eddie. Make sure to follow through. I'm sorry I won't get to see how it all ends up."

Ed looks to Goodman in confusion. "Why are you talking like you're going somewhere?" he asks. "You're the one who wanted me to get involved in all this—"

"I'd stay if I could, buddy boy. But I can't." He shifts uneasily on his feet. "I could feel it the minute I left my room. You can't put off the inevitable, not forever." He lets the ax drop to the floor. "It's funny, I thought I'd be more afraid."

"What—" Before Ed can ask his question, there's a metallic clang. The floor below Goodman's feet begins to glow red-hot. A dark, snake-like shape springs from the floor and wraps around Goodman's leg. It's a chain. Another spirals upwards, entwining Goodman to the waist. A third and fourth snap through the air and tighten around his arms and torso.

"Ah," Goodman cries out, as a hooked chain digs into his hand, and another catches him in the thigh. "Stay back, please," he says when Ed rushes toward him.

"What's happening?"

"It's all right, Eddie. This has nothing to do with you. It's my own doing. Time to give the devil his due. They're taking me out of the world now. Somewhere to pay the piper for all I've done." He gasps as the chains pull him to his knees. "They were just waiting for me to leave my rooms," he pants. "Nobody could ever find me there."

He's sinking into the floor now, as if it was quicksand. Ed tries to reach for him, but Green holds him back.

"Please do what you can for the people here, Eddie," Goodman says. "They need you—"

He's gone.

Blue Palace Hotel, Fifth Floor, West Hallway September 20, 11:23 p.m.

Scent. Faint. Fear. Taste the air. Somewhere. Near? Crouch low. Sniff carpet. Yes. Scent. Lick lips. Blood taste. Growl, growl. Looking. Looking. Door. Go through door. Scent? Scent? Voice. Person. People. Not care. Not enemy. Sniff. Listen. Nothing. Look. Nothing. Strangers. Empty things. Vibrating. Ignore. Door. Through door. Enemy. Where? Where? Sniff. Taste. There. Faint. Hate. Follow. Follow. Follow.

Long ago, sun. Long ago, air. Pain. Enemy.

Scent. Scent. Up. Follow trail. Stronger now. Very near. Listen. Sounds. Voices. Listen. Move closer. Move slot. Quiet. Sniff air. Taste air. Scent. Yes. Voice. Yes. Enemy. Lick lips. Growl. Taste blood. Closer. Closer. Look. Look. People. Voices. Enemy. Enemy. Yes. Howl. Run.

Now.

Blue Palace Hotel, Fifth Floor, East Corridor
September 20, 11:27 p.m.

Ed kneels on the floor, pushing his hands against the spot where Goodman vanished. "Come on," he yells. "We can go after him."

"No, we can't," Green says firmly. "He's not in this building anymore."

"What are you talking about?" Ed stands up and put himself in front of Green. "What are you talking about, and who are you exactly, anyway?"

"I'm somebody who's been into this shit longer than you," Green answers. "And I make it my business to lend a hand to the ignorant. I've seen this kind of thing before. He's gone away from here. Wherever the dead go when they're done here. And they don't come back."

"But..." Ed starts, "What do we do... did you hear that?"

Green cocks his head. "Yeah..."

"It sounds like howling," Karen whispers.

Ed steps away from the two of them. "It's coming for me." He presses his fingers to his neck. His scar is throbbing. He pulls his fingers away and sees the blood. "I know what it is."

"Look!" Karen points to the elevator at the near end of the hallway. A dark shape comes into view, a canine form with two blazing red eyes. Its jaw hangs low, and a thick fluid spills from its hooked teeth onto the carpet.

Green looks behind him. The smilers are still massed on the other side of the rope. "Take my hands," he says. "We'll go through one of these walls."

"You go," Ed answers. "It's after me. I'll lead it away."

"You're talking crazy," Green grabs his arm.

Ed pulls it away. "Look, get out of here! It's coming. Go!" He takes a step forward, then another, and then he's running, running straight at the black thing. "You can't put off the inevitable, not forever."

And then Ed feels a terrible weight slam into him and is overwhelmed with a scent of wet fur and rotting meat. He collapses as the pain grips his neck, feels himself falling, not hitting the floor but continuing to tumble downward into darkness.

Falling

Ed wants to black out, but the pain keeps his consciousness from fading. There is an animal presence tearing at his thoughts, a feral hate trying to overwhelm his mind, even as his body is being chewed and ground.

Razors across his throat. Knives in his shoulders. The pain is too great for Ed to cry out. He closes his eyes. He wants only to be somewhere else, anywhere else. And he is seven years old, lying on cold concrete. He sees the dog's body, its head cut off, the blood everywhere. The man in the overalls drops a bloody ax and asks if he's okay. His parents are running toward him. The Ed-child is fainting and his last thoughts are, *This is my fault.*

"I remember," Ed croaks, lying somewhere in a cold, dark place. Does he feel something in his chest, something warm and powerful, rising into his throat?

"It wasn't your fault," Ed gasps. "You came at me because you were sick, because you hated me...." Ed's vision seems to rush past the mass of fur and shadow that's engulfed him. He sees, as if down a long corridor, a ragged dog, a young boy. He feels hot tears running down his cheek. "You hated me because of what I did to you." Then Ed screams. His face is being eaten. A burning knife is stabbing him in the eye, over and over and over.

Blue Palace Hotel, Courtyard

May 27, 10:01 a.m., Thirty Years Ago

Running down a corridor, running to get away, running. *I didn't see anything*, he thinks. *I didn't do anything*. Running into the courtyard behind the hotel. And there is the dog, a skeletal stray with patches of fur

missing from its back. It approaches Ed slowly, sniffing, eyes quizzical, tongue hanging out, tail high and wagging.

Ed wipes tears from his eyes. He reaches for a rusted pipe lying against the chain-link fence. He raises it high, brings it down against the dog's head. "No!" Ed shouts, and the dog whines and yelps, and Ed swings again, cracking the pipe against the animal's leg. It whimpers and tries to shrink away, never showing its teeth, never barking—just crying, backing away. Ed raises the pipe, sees the blood on it.

Blue Palace Hotel, Kitchen.

September 20, 11: 31 p.m.

Put broken glass in the soup? That would pay them back for the way they treat me.

Blue Palace Hotel, Lobby

September 20, 11:31 p.m.

I'll follow her back to her room tonight and she'll be sorry she snubbed me.

Blue Palace Hotel, Sixth Floor, West Hallway

September 20, 11:31 p.m.

Why did I steal this wallet? I'll put it in Rita's bag and tell the supervisor I saw her take it.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 611

September 20, 11:31 p.m.

The kids don't even appreciate this vacation. A few bruises will stop their whining.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement, Service Corridor #7

September 20, 11:31 p.m.

There. Now the fire alarms are disabled. Let the inspector get a look at that, and Mr. Cohen will be looking for a new job.

Blue Palace Hotel, Lobby, Concierge Desk
September 20, 11:31 p.m.

No one knows I have these razorblades in my purse. No one will know I did it. I'm a good girl.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 219
September 20, 11:31 p.m.

A few more rounds to load. I like the way the bullets click into place. Like a machine.

Blue Palace Hotel, Roof
September 20, 11:31 p.m.

The wires are stripped. They'll start sparking any time now. People will see the flames for miles.

Blue Palace Hotel, Room 434
September 20, 11:27 p.m.

They'll be back soon. Be patient. This closet is the best place to hide. This knife is more than sharp enough.

A Cold Dark Place

"Oh God, why did I do that? Oh God, Oh God..."

The creature is sitting on Ed's chest, crushing him, and he can feel strips of flesh being pulled from his neck by its teeth. He can't bring himself to open his eyes. "I'm sorry..." he whispers, and the words become meaningless sounds that he repeats over and over "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

"I'm sorry," Ed says again, and his voice seems to ease the pain in his throat. "I know you hate me, but listen..." Ed opens his eyes. The creature has pulled its head away from him. Its red eyes are just inches from his own, twin pools of blood in a sea of dark fur.

"You can't... hate forever," Ed is saying. He has to concentrate each word, as if he's speaking a foreign language. "People can... but not... animals. It's over,

do you understand? I know you suffered... that was a long time ago. Your suffering is over, if you let go..." Ed imagines his voice is an invisible light, radiating from him and flowing over the body of the creature.

"It's okay," Ed says. "Let the anger go. Let all the anger go." The animal cocks its massive head. It opens its maw and lunges for Ed's eyes.

But then it stops. "That's right," Ed tells it. It stops, and pants to catch its breath. Then he says, "Remember what you used to be. Before the pain. Remember."

The creature sniffs the air, turning its head to the left, then the right. Ed feels its legs push against him as it stands, then raises its body off of him. Ed moves slowly, crawling away from the beast. "Easy," he says. His throat is raw. "Easy... you're all right...."

Ed wonders where he is, but he doesn't want to take his attention from the creature. The floor beneath him feels greasy. He shifts off his back to a sitting position. The monster growls, low and long.

But its sounds are different. As Ed watches, the beast dwindles, shrugging into a smaller form, its muzzle shortening, its eyes losing their light. It had been six feet high at the shoulder, with a maw like a crocodile. Now its proportions are reducing, and in the time it takes Ed to rise to his feet it's become an ordinary dog.

It's a mutt, a mix of German Shepard, Doberman, something else. It barks once, then sits on its haunches and scratches one ear with its foot.

Ed touches his own throat. There is no blood.

"Well... look at you," he says to the dog in a shaky voice. The dog tilts its head.

And then a voice echoes around them: "And look at you, darling."

Blue Palace Hotel, Old Furnace Room **September 20, 11:55 p.m.**

The dog yawns. Ed tries not to stare at the walls, the floors, or the things that drift lazily inside them. He watches the woman cross the room and stop in front of

him. Her hair is coated with clotted blood, and hangs in front of her face like a curtain. She pulls the hair aside. Her face has no eyes.

"Why are you all doing this?" he asks her.

She laughs. She has three mouths now, three pairs of lips stacked one on top of the other in the center of a blank face. Laughter comes from one mouth; the others make faint whispers. "But darling, I'm only giving the people what they want. You hear it all the time. Someone dies and for years the mourners don't shut up about it. Every night they cry out in their minds, *come back, come back, come back.*" She strokes a finger across his cheek. "Well, guess what? We heard you. We're coming back."

The room is a crooked cube whose walls, floor and ceiling pulse, ooze and drip. Shadowy forms float within the muck, flattened hands and legs and heads slowly bobbing like fish. Ed can see traces of the original room beneath the slime: cinderblocks, electric outlets, the dirty glow of a bare electric bulb. No door. An enormous furnace against one wall, metal dented and twisted.

"We're all coming back, the dead and the never-dead and the great dark mother of mothers," Victoria says. Ed sees that the middle of the three mouths is talking; the other sets of lips move silently in different patterns.

Ed steps sideways. Victoria's hand flies up, motioning him to stop. Her evening glove has been torn open. A single eye stares at him from the center of her palm, its pupil narrowing. "Please don't, darling," she says. "There's just nowhere for you to go, I'm afraid."

Ed tries to take another step. His foot will not pull away from the floor. He looks down and sees fingers grasping his ankle. He feels something else tightening against his other leg. "Victoria..." he says.

"You'd best hold still," she coos. "It will hurt much less that way. Save your questions, darling. Once we have you stitched up inside one of my children, then

we'll share all the secrets. We'll have all the time in the world."

Ed looks up from the floor, and as he stares at Victoria it occurs to him that there's another direction to look in, a place over her shoulder and much closer than he realized. He looks.

Blue Palace Hotel, Eighth Floor Suite May 27, 9:37 a.m., Thirty Years Ago

Ed is looking for his mother. He was supposed to stay in the break room until she got back, but she didn't come back. So he walked down the hall and took the elevator all the way to the top. Once before, his mother had taken him up there, to show him off to some of the other ladies who worked in the hotel, so he thinks she might be there now.

When he gets to the eight floor, it's very quiet. No one is in sight. He wanders down the hallway, wondering why so many people left their shoes outside their doors. Shoes without anyone in them make him nervous. He imagines them coming to life and chasing him.

Ed hears the roar of a vacuum cleaner, and runs toward it, smiling.

There is a door partway open. Ed pushes it aside and enters a big room with fancy furniture and a funny smell. He walks forward, following the sound of the vacuum. There's another sound, but Ed can't quite make out what it is. He steps into another room, about to call out to his mother.

He realizes he's made a mistake. A stranger is there, a woman, and she's bent over a baby's crib. Ed is afraid. He doesn't belong here. He wants to run but he's afraid he'll knock something over and she'll hear him. He backs slowly out of the room. The baby is crying. She picks up the baby. She doesn't hold it in her arms, the way Ed has seen his mother hold his cousin Judy. She holds the baby in front of her, keeping it at arm's length. The baby's face is red as a beet. There are tears on its cheeks. It's so small that Ed wonders how it can make so much noise, louder than the vacuum cleaner.

The woman gives the baby a shake, as if she's snapping the dust off an old towel.

Ed can't be sure what he's hearing, the howling of the vacuum cleaner or the shrieking of the baby, because the blood thumping behind his ears is pounding so loudly and mixing everything up. He sees the infant dropped into the crib like a coin into a wishing well, and then he's running, running, breathing too hard to cry, just wanting to get out, away from dark halls and empty shoes, out where the sun is shining. When he's in the courtyard, and the pathetic animal comes loping toward him, weak and friendly and stupid, he knows that he can either be weak or strong, angry or afraid, and he's already swinging the heavy pipe before he realizes he's made a choice.

**Blue Palace Hotel, Basement, Service Corridor #3
September 20, 11:55 p.m.**

"It's like Jell-O," Tina whispers. She presses her hand against the cold membrane and it quivers. "What is it?" After a few seconds the cold is so strong that she has to pull her palm away.

"I don't know," Green says, frowning. "Are you sure he was in this room?" The translucent ooze fills the doorway; they can make out shapes moving on the other side, but no detail is visible.

"Mmm-hmm." Tina raises a finger to it, but doesn't touch. "He was talking to that lady. This stuff was here too, but you could see through it."

"Can't we... you know... go through it?" Karen asks. "I mean... like we did with the walls."

Green shakes his head. "I wouldn't recommend it. This is not-of-this-earth stuff, know what I'm saying? But maybe we can find a way to break it.... Hey, kid, what are you doing?"

Tina has taken her doll in both hands and pressed its body against the membrane. Now she's pushing, and very slowly the vicious gel is yielding, absorbing the doll into itself. "Franny wants to go inside," Tina says,

and they watch as the tiny body is pulled into the darkness.

Blue Palace Hotel, Basement, Old Furnace Room September 20, 11:59 p.m.

Victoria walks a slow circle around Ed, who stands motionless in the center of the room. She holds her hands in front of her chest, palms out. The eyes in her hands blink and look to the left, the right, the left. "Any last words, darling? I wouldn't advise using that special voice of yours, it will just make me angry."

Ed glances at the floor. Flat shapes are arranging themselves at his feet, like a shadow: legs, torso, arms, head. "Is that for me?" he asks.

"Your new exterior," Victoria answers. "A child from below will use you for its skeleton, you see. But don't worry, you'll have plenty of company. The anguish in this place has reached a fever pitch. After tonight's symphony of death and murder, the gates will be wide open and thousands of the children will be born here."

"And does that include your child, Victoria? The one you murdered in its crib?"

She stops walking. "You—you don't know...." She is standing in front of him, and her three pairs of lips are vibrating like harp strings.

"That's the real horror, isn't it?" Ed spits the words out like they're poison. "It's all just Halloween decoration around here, compared to what you've been carrying in your head since that day."

The highest of her three mouths opens, and the voice that comes out is like breaking glass. "*SEAL HIM IN.*"

The shapes on the floor quiver. One flies toward Ed, and it wraps around his leg from ankle to knee. An arm-shape encases his left forearm. Ed falls to the ground, nauseous. Victoria is laughing.

"There's no escape, is there, Victoria?" Ed gasps. "Even in death, there's no escape from what you did. You're as trapped here as everyone else!"

"SILENCE!" comes the broken-glass voice, and it seems to Ed that he also hears Victoria's voice, but her words are too faint to understand. He tries to push himself upright, to push his hands against the cold quivering floor, but he feels himself losing consciousness.

There is a shape beneath the floor, something moving, next to Ed's left hand. It's not gray and shadowed like the other shapes in the ooze, but white, and Ed moves his fingers toward it without thinking. When he feels it moving beneath the gel, touching his hand, he pulls it free and finds himself holding a child's doll.

Ed stares uncomprehendingly at the misshapen head, the cartoon face, and the white cotton shift, impossibly white after passing through the slime. He recognizes the object as Tina's doll. But beyond that, he knows he's seen it in some other context. The face was different then. But the shape of the hands, the dress... the white shift, that pink pattern on the edges... he knows he's seen it somewhere else.

On a shelf, over a crib, its glass eyes staring blankly while the screaming rose to a peak and then stopped.

Something is crawling across Ed's back, trying to wrap itself under his arms and around to his chest. Ed takes the doll, grips his fingers and thumbs around its torso. He holds it in the air. "Look, Victoria," he gasps, feeling a papery band tighten around his throat. "Remember..."

"Goodbye, young man. Good—" Victoria holds one hand out toward him, then another. Ed sees the eyeballs in her palms widen, sees her three mouths fall open. "No..." she whispers.

Ed feels the doll moving in his hand. He seems to be seeing it with two sets of eyes. There is the plastic and

cloth of the doll, but he can also see inside it; a cloud of light is stirring.

Victoria has put her hands to her face. She is backing away. He hears her muffled voice. "Stay away! Stay away from me!" She pulls her hands away and her face is normal again, wet with tears, pale with terror. "Francis!"

The second skin constricting Ed's body begins to loosen. He stands, lurches closer to Victoria, brandishing the doll in front of him. Its arms and legs are moving, stiffly. Its head is bobbing.

"Please..." Victoria begs. "Please, take it away."

"Mama." The voice is high-pitched and piercing. Ed feels the doll shake as it speaks. "Mama."

Victoria screams.

The doll vibrates in Ed's hand, and then it flies to pieces, head turning to powder, arms and legs hurled across the room. Ed pulls his hand back in shock. There is a small nimbus of light hovering in the air. It floats slowly toward Victoria.

"No!" she shouts, scampering backwards like a frightened animal. She backs against the dark metal of the disabled furnace. The glowing cloud is almost upon her. Her body shakes in fear. "Please, please," she says. "Please don't look at me." She comes to the boiler's open fire door, kneels beside it. "Help me," she whines. Her hands tighten around the edges of the doorway. For a second she peers down into the open furnace. Then she stares up at the cloud.

Ed takes a step closer. He has an urge to reach out, to touch the cloud. The glow at its center becomes brighter. And then, before Ed can get any nearer to it, the cloud shoots forward, rushing toward Victoria, enveloping her face.

She makes no sound as she tumbles backwards into the furnace.

Ed stands still for a moment, then runs forward. As he does so, he feels the ooze beneath his feet begin to move, to flow. He sees the walls quiver, hears the

sucking and sliding noises over his head. All the gel that covers the room is beginning to run like melted snow, pouring away and draining toward the furnace.

Ed slips, falls into the icy torrent. It pushes him forward. He tries to press his hands to the floor, but everything is too slick and he's tumbling, tumbling, up over the lip of the furnace and down, down, down.

Nowhere

The feeling of falling has stopped.

Ed is hanging, suspended, upside down. He feels as if he's miles long, his feet leagues above him, his arms light-years wide. Below him in the darkness, he sees Victoria, her black hair sprawling around her against a blacker darkness. She's worlds away but within reach, and as she looks up at him her eyes seem like planets, her tears like oceans.

He forces an arm toward her, shouting for her to grab hold, but his words are swallowed up by emptiness. She seems to see him, a sad smile crosses her lips. They move, and he can almost read the words, *Goodbye, darling, goodbye.*

Something is rising below her. A shape that stretches farther than he can see, that reaches the horizon, that is the horizon. A universe of flesh, or a body made of smoke, Ed can't be certain. He watches as Victoria tumbles down toward the leviathan, not sure if years are passing by, or seconds. When a vast maw opens up to accept Victoria's body, she's a mere speck of dust swallowed up by a nebula.

All Ed can do is stare at the infinite creature—if it is a creature—as it fills more and more of his field of vision. It's tangled up in an unending maze made of its own body. It's close enough to touch, but an incomprehensible distance away. And it's calling him. *COME*, it commands in a voice that crawls up his spinal cord and into his thoughts. *COME*. He knows that he can't deny the directive much longer, and that he doesn't want to.

And when he feels the sharp pinch in his ankle, the tugging on his leg, the sensation is so inconsequential that it barely registers. Only when he feels his knees against the edge of the furnace, feels his body tumble backwards onto the floor, sees the dog release his ankle from its jaws and look at him quizzically—only then does Ed close his eyes.

**Orpheus Facility #6, Level 4, Undisclosed Location
 September 21, 11:12 a.m.**

"They're gone," Ed says. "All of them. They're gone."

The laboratory has been gutted. Bare wires hang from the walls and ceiling. Chairs and tables lie sideways on the floor. Torn papers, broken glass, books, light fixtures and unrecognizable detritus are scattered everywhere.

"What happened here?" Karen asks, placing a palm on Ed's shoulder.

Green looks thoughtful for a moment, then says, "I don't know, but I'll find out eventually."

Ed walks away from them, glances at Tina and the dog as they wander between piles of trash. He faces a bare wall and can see the outlines left on the paint by the machines that once stood there. "They were right here," he says. "Ten pods. And in one of them... this can't be happening."

"We'll find it," Karen tells him. "Somehow. We won't stop looking until we do."

Ed closes his eyes. It's far off, faint, but when everything else is quiet he still can hear the voice quite clearly.

COME.

"I think," he tells Karen, "we'd better hurry."

STEFAN PETRUCHA,

"THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER"

A professional writer for over a decade, Stefan Petrucha has worked in many genres and media. His novels include **Dark Ages: Assamite** from White Wolf and his self-published *Making God*, both of which received rave reviews. His comic book writings include the internationally acclaimed *X-Files* comic from Topps, which has been republished in six trade paperbacks in the US and abroad; over one hundred comic book adventures of Mickey Mouse & Donald Duck from Egmont Publishing in Denmark, which have been published in over thirty-five languages; and a slew of titles from Moonstone Comics, including *Moonstone Noir: Boston Blackie* and *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. His film and television work include feature scripts under development and the animated series *Journey to the WonderWorld*. Petrucha also served, for the last two years of the filmmaker's life, as the personal assistant to Joseph L. Mankiewicz, director of classics such as *All About Eve* and *Sleuth*.

SETH LINDBERG,

"EURYDICE"

While it has been hinted that Seth Lindberg is an ephemeral memory or a transient state of emotion, Mr. Lindberg wishes to convey that he is just a writer living in Providence, Rhode Island, with two somewhat surly cats. His work has appeared in numerous horror webzines and several horror anthologies, including 2002's *Darker Side*, edited by John Pelan and published by Signet/Roc. His website is <http://www.sethlindberg.com>

ALLEN RAUSCH,

"DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS"

Allen Rausch is PC Editor for GameSpy Industries, and his reviews, interviews and articles on the gaming world can be seen regularly at www.gamespy.com. Originally from Long Island, New York, he's been writing professionally since 1996. His articles have appeared in the magazines *PC Gamer*, *PC Accelerator* and *Computer*

Games, and on-line at CNET, *GamePower*, *JournalX* and *Daily Radar*. In the past, he has worked on game design for Vivendi Universal and Westwood Studios, in marketing for Interplay Entertainment, Toys R Us and Acclaim, and is a contributing author for several White Wolf gaming supplements. Allen currently lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Elizabeth, and his daughter, Ilyana Maria.

RICK CHILLOT,
"CORRIDORS"

An escapee from a full-time corporate job at a national magazine, Rick Chillot now works from home as a freelance writer and editor for various nonfiction magazines and books. "Corridors" is the latest of several supernatural fiction pieces he's written for White Wolf (including contributions to the **Hunter: The Reckoning** and **Demon: The Fallen** storytelling games). When he's not panicking over deadlines, he enjoys hosting a radio show on his local NPR affiliate and cycling the back roads near his non-haunted home in rural Pennsylvania.

PHILIPPE BOULLE
(EDITOR)

Philippe Boulle is the managing editor of White Wolf Fiction, and thus spends far too much time thinking about vampires and other things that go bump in the night. He is the editor of the anthology **Demon: Lucifer's Shadow**, as well as the author of the novels **Tribe Novel: Red Talons**, **Vampire: A Morbid Initiation**, and **Vampire: The Madness of Priests**, and of the science-fiction novels *Heavy Gear: Crisis of Faith* and *Heavy Gear: Blood on the Wind*. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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THE

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ISBN 1-58846-857-2 WW11905
\$6.99US \$11.00CAN



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