



Pyrrhic Kingdom

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Stormsdream PDF Edition, version 1.13.7.18

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Thank you**

Dedication

Thanks to William Shakespeare for the plot
and to H.P. Lovecraft for the tone

"I am weary."

"Do not say such things."

"It is true."

"No, we are strong."

"We are?"

"Yes."

"You are strong."

"No. Yes. Together, we are strong."

"Together."

"We are strong."

"Together."

"Never alone. Remember. Never alone."

"In the dark."

"Yes."

"In the cold."

"Yes, even in the cold."

"Waiting. Always waiting."

"Patience."

"Why are we waiting?"

"For conditions. Juxtaposition of events. Spontaneous alignment."

"Spontaneous? Serendipitous."

"If you will. Mostly, for dark. Quiet. Empty streets."

"Serendipitous alignment. In the cold. In the dark."

"It is who we are."

"Who we are. Dark. Quiet. Empty. They do not care."

"What?"

"They do not even know."

"It is our purpose."

"And, I wonder. Have you ever wondered?"

"Never."

"Surely."

"There is no doubt."

"No, I mean. Yes, I mean. How?"

"What?"

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"How can they not know?"

"Because we are strong."

"No, I mean. Things used to be different."

"Did they?"

"No, I mean. They didn't know, but they didn't."

"What?"

"They knew us. That we were important."

"Yes."

"The police. We hide even from the police."

"Yes."

"Questioning. Doubting. Disrespectful."

"It is the way of things."

"I remember."

"What?"

"I remember when they did not hold us. Cage us. Drunk tank. Loony bin. Observation. When was the last time?"

"Two months."

"Two months since we rotted in a cell. The stink of it. The shame."

"They could not hold us."

"They never should have held us. Not my point."

"No?"

"Why do we do this? Watching. Waiting. In the cold and the damp for people who do not care."

"We do this so that they do not have to know. They do not care? I am grateful. I am grateful for every day they do not have to care. For every sight they will never have to see. You know what it does to them. The sights we have seen."

"Yes."

"It would consume them. That is why we sit in the cold. In the dark. Because we can."

"Our purpose."

"To do what others do not. To stand what others cannot. We are the light in darkness. The flame of justice. We are the guardians of the sacred way."

"Our calling."

"If you do not feel the call, then go, but I will not shirk my

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duty. We are here in the cold and the dark because of what we have felt in that building."

"Darkness."

"The lurking presence. The nameless horror. Growing. Festering. Consuming."

"Evil."

"Yes."

"It must be stopped."

"Yes."

"Our calling."

"Yes."

"Serendipitous alignment."

"Yes, spontaneous. Serendipitous. Juxtaposition. None are about. All is quiet. It is waiting. Our way is clear."

"Then, let us go."



They approached the building, Andrew and Nicholas. Stalked the stonework. Doorway. Entryway. Broken. Rusted. Finding the stairs, they climbed. Creaking. Stars and moonlight. Drifting. Shadows and clouds. Dirty streetlight. Orange as a wounded flame. Darkness. Shadow. Gray and white. Dripping water. Clinging damp. They turned at the landing. More stairs. Filth on the ground. Stale air. Pressing silence. Fall of footsteps. Climbing. Turning. Climbing. Stop.

Row of doors so much like prison cells. Numbered. Peeling. Turning green and brown. The air like a slaughterhouse. The damp like a sewer. Checking numbers, they moved. Counting doorways. Quietly. Step by step. Rotten carpet concealing wood and concrete. A door like rancid meat hanging half-open in the dark. Beyond was darkness and the stench of death. Pushing at the door. Feeling it moan. Looking into oblivion. A window. Clouds pushing light. Shadows writhing against the wall. Smothering a couch. Chair. Old television set. Nothing.

They entered. Slowly. The floor creaking like an ancient bone. Moving, they traced the room. Step. Step. Looking to the couch. Stained black. The chair. Television. Empty. Doorway to the

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kitchen. Curtain. Hallway to another room. Something. Like a man. Once a man. Figure. Indistinct. Moving. Drawn to them. Ignoring them. Limping slowly like something not born with feet. Distorted. Deformed. Reeking of pestilence. Monstrous. Swarming with nightmare. Twisting the shadows. Teeth and hair.

The two men standing still as statues. Watching. Stench like a hammer. Moonlight fleeing like a coward. Nicholas stepping forward. Holding a dagger carved of old bronze.

"Begone!"

The creature notices. Sways. And, attacks. Hands reaching. Claws striking. Dagger forgotten. Tumbling. Screeching. The man screaming. The thing silent. Moan. Growl. Andrew moving. Long stick like a club. Striking. Striking. Nicholas clutching at the chair leg. Words forgotten. Pulling. Pulling. Creature writhing. Scratching. Snarling. Biting.

"The power of Christ!" Strike with the stick. "The power of Christ commands you!" Strike with the stick. Screaming. "The power of Christ!" Striking man or creature. Again. Screaming. Again. Shrieking. "The power!" Wailing.

Moonlight splintering. Stick breaking. Crying. Roaring. Chair knocked over. Couch toppled. Seeking the dagger. Shadows descending. Darkness swirling. Grasping blood and bronze. Stabbing. Stabbing. No words. Screaming. Crying. Man or monster. Stabbing. Man and monster. Tumbling. Turning. In the darkness. In the night.

Silent. Wounded silence. One man. No voice. No words. Screaming. Hoarse as a whisper. Dry heaving sobs. Fading like a forgotten memory. Lost to fog. Bloody clothes. Torn. On his knees. Over Nicholas. Over the creature so much like a man but a monster.

"The power." Voice drifting into whisper. Slipping into dust.



"I couldn't," Andrew said, gripping the cup. Whiskey. Coffee with too much cream. Paul silent. Watching. "Couldn't." Thumbs pressing into the cup's edge. No longer warm. "It was humaform. I told you."

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The creature had grown still. The room had become silent. Whispered breathing. Nicholas had not moved. And, had not moved. And, had not moved. Quiet. Scent of blood. Andrew had stood. Suddenly. And, Nicholas had not moved.

"It did not fear us," Andrew said. "The words. Nothing."

He had backed away from the monster. Nicholas had not moved. The wall had stopped him. Pushed the breath from him. The dagger falling. Clattering like broken glass against the floor. And, Nicholas had not moved.

"When was the last time we faced such a thing like a man?" he said, tasting the cup. "So much like a man. Not a man."

The wall had held him. Had supported him. Without thought. Without time.

"What could I have done?"

He had retrieved his shoulder bag. Found turpentine. Lighter-fluid. Gasoline. Doused the creature. The furniture. Splashing over the body.

"We know the risks," Paul said.

Andrew had lit a match. Had brought fire to the room.

"We know our duty," Andrew said, remembering warmth. Had watched light and flame. "Not the same thing. Easy to forget."

He had abandoned the room to fire, smoke and flame. The building. Firemen might come. He had not waited to see.

"Andrew," Paul said.

He had wandered far from there. Winding streets. Had found a telephone.

"Andrew, we all have doubts sometimes."

"No."

Wandering streets. Dark as infinity. Cold as bone.

"There was no doubt," he said. Burning. Bodies burning. "It was too strong for us. It didn't care." Frozen. Voices screaming. "It didn't care."

"Not so strong then."

"What?" Stench in his hair.

"It was weak. Didn't care."

"No." Smoke in his eyes. "You weren't there."

"You are here. Whereas it. Not so strong."

"Strong enough." Night dark empty streets. Purifying cold.

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"You were stronger. All that matters."

"Tell Nicholas."

"We honor Nicholas."

"Honor." Blood on his fingertips. Under his nails.

"Never forget his sacrifice. All who have sacrificed."

Coffee, the color of old mud in his hands. Tasting of rust.

"He said he was tired," Andrew said. "So tired."

"The night is long. The candle burns so quick. Done in an instant."

"No," Andrew said. "You don't."

"What?"

"Understand."

"What?"

"Even a candle should burn the dark. So weary. I couldn't." The cup was a pit of smoke and blood. Looking into the abyss. "It wasn't tired."

"It fell all the same."

"You weren't there. It didn't fear us."

"To its folly."

"It didn't fear us. Why didn't it fear us?"

Silence. Cold as the abyss.



Andrew went home, having rested at the club. Slept. Conversation of the night lost in silence. Washed. Water flowing over him. Hot as fire. Cleansed himself as best he could. Slip of a breakfast. Black coffee. Bitter juice. He went home by morning's light. Once a new part of town. Still a doorman. Smiled. Tipped his hat. Elevator that worked more often than not. Andrew stood at his door. Key in hand. Watched his door as if he expected it to bleed. Floating on his feet. Remembering he must breathe. He touched the door. Key in his hand. Remember to breathe.

Remember the way. The workings of a door. The feel of a key. The tumbling of locks. Silent whisper of a door. Feeling the world open. Stretching slowly open like the touch of sunlight against the morning. Hush of daylight as he passed the threshold. Brushing his hand over wood. Fingers lingering. Pushing. The click of

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it closing. Sudden silence like a forgotten sigh. He stood in void. Listening to nothing. Then, the rustling of distant motion. Footsteps approaching. Beth appeared, trying not to run. Hands extended. Arms enveloping. Warm.

"You're home," she said, holding him like a breath never to be let go.

"Yes."

"I haven't. Breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You must."

"I'll watch you eat."

"Not the same."

"You'll just have to tempt me."

"I can try."

They turned hand-in-hand, searching for the kitchen, finding it. Preparing toast. Eggs over-easy. Sausage with sage and rosemary. They moved to the table. Small. Round. Breakfast nook by the window. Coffee with milk and sugar. The scent of fresh orange juice. Beth ate slowly. All but silent. Andrew watching. Resting in the moment. Free of thought. Beth sipping juice. Warmth in the morning window's light.

"Long night?" she said, holding the glass, watching it as if it gave her something to study other than his eyes. Granting him silence. Room to find his breath. The chill night air washing his heart. Brushing the hollow of his chest like a bitter stone.

"I lost him," he said to the back of his hand. Twisting fingers. Lowering them. Hands to the table as if he would grip it forever. "I lost." The night had been dark. The room cold.

"Did I know him?"

"I don't know."

"Was he young?"

"Yes."

"Doubtful then. What was his name?"

"Nicholas."

"Young Nicholas. No. No, I have no face for the name."

"Pity."

"I know so few of the company anymore."

"There are so few of the company anymore."

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"All the more precious. These few. These noble few. I should have a face for the name."

Nothing but shapes and shadows. Figures lying in the dark. Entwined like angry lovers. Moving nevermore.

"How long before I forget?" he said.

"You'll never forget."

"Never?"

"Never."

He touched her hand. Fingertips lingering.

"If only that were true."

"You say such things."

"Names. Faces."

"Remember."

"Fading. Forgotten."

"I remember."

"Do you?"

"Arthur. Tall. Blond. Matthew. Not so tall. Hazel eyes. Edward. Scar on his arm from here to here."

"Edward is still alive." Hand to his face. Ragged breath. Rubbing forehead, temples, as if he would gouge out his eyes.

"Cherish them."

"Easily said."

"Dishonor them, then."

"No."

"Go on."

"Never."

"Easily said. Already done."

"You don't understand."

"Also, easily said."

"But true."

"Coward."

"No."

"Easily said? Hard to do. Weakness. Cop-out. Cowardice."

"No!" Fist into table. Plates, cups and saucers jumping with fright.

Sitting still. Watching the table. Beth moved a hand, slowly, straightening a cup.

"Long night," she said. "Hard night. Lost. Did you sleep? Rest?"

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"Some."

"So much for one to carry. Wearying. Even the strongest. The brightest. The best."

"Necessary."

"Rest today. So you don't forget."

"Easily said." Flicker of a smile on his lips.

"Yes, very easily said."



The study was quiet. Dry. Warm. Smelling of old books and candle-wax; even though, there was never a candle burning in the place. Small lamps. Small windows. Diffuse and drifting light as if time was forever lost to twilight. Books on shelves. Manuscripts everywhere. Uneven stacks of paper as if there had once been an attempt at organization. Disrupted by sporadic dusting. Natural chaos.

Andrew reclining in an old leather chair. Resting. Days since he had left Nicholas soaking in flame. Andrew holding papers as if he might study them. Reports. Evidence from the field teams. They traveled, seeking rumors, clues and stories. The field teams always seeking. Posing as salesmen. Delivery men. Postmen. Anyone who could knock on a door and ask questions. Ask if residents had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Anything to get the people talking.

Occasionally, the field teams were actually postmen. Salesmen. Talking to people. Developing rapport. Gaining trust. Salesmen traveled. Pollsters asked questions. Listened to stories. Gossip. Rumors. Learned if pets were missing. Children run away. Strangers in town. Strange things in the neighborhood. Ghost stories. Haunted houses. Abandoned buildings. Darkness. Mistrust. Written up. Reports submitted.

Andrew looked for connections. Searched for clues. Coincidences. Anything that might be more than just a rumor. A run-away that might be a kidnapping. A body that would never be recognized. Monsters and mutilations. Intrusions into the natural world. Cracks in the void. Things that should never be. Existing.

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Like the ill-formed man. The thing in the dark. Unafraid. Striking Nicholas. Breaking. Clawing. Biting. Must be stopped. At any cost, they could not spread. Allowed to mutilate. Despoil. Kill. They had to be found. Discovered in their nests. Holds. Ruined buildings. Desecrated homes. Taking innocence with them as they fell. They had to be stopped in their birth pains before they could kill.

The reports studied. The clues discovered. Cross-referenced. Andrew held paper in his hands. Studied words like forgotten symbols. Saw Nicholas in the dark. Not breathing. Never moving. Andrew looked at words, reading them. Remembered screams and cries. Felt the dagger cold and slick in his hand. He looked at the page unfinished. Unrevealed. Unread. Eyes drifting over words without seeing them. Looked at them again. Blurring together, and looked at them again.

Nicholas had not moved. Would never move. The creature still as shadow. It's shape drifting as if it wasn't real, and Nicholas had not moved. He had laughed. Once, he had laughed. Comparing notes. Reviewing maps. Field team reports. Field teams never followed-up. Faced the malformed creatures themselves. Only reported. Left to putrefy. Smoke and rot. Grow in pestilence and shadow. Left for the intercept teams. Had once laughed. Field teams had no stomach for decay. No faith standing against the devourers of children's souls.

Nicholas. Arthur. Edward. Never smiled with their eyes. What intercept teams had seen. Never laughed anymore. Stolen. Forgotten by the dark. Left with scars. Gifts from the horrors they banished back into the abyss. Price extracted. Toll taken. Nicholas would never breathe again.

The reports did not stop. Would never stop. The field teams reporting. Leaving patchwork trails for Andrew to wander if he could but focus his eyes. Looking at the same page, again. And, again. Smelling blood on his freshly washed hands.

The reports would never stop. He studied the page and tried to focus his eyes.



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Andrew did not own a car, but he drove one all the same. Necessity dictated. Reports cross-referenced. Compared. Traced on a map draped across his desk. Andrew drove. Paul riding shotgun. Watching the countryside. No one else available. Looking at old fields and dry grass. Maybe, a cow. Narrow, empty roads. Trees. Sporadic buildings. More fields. More Cows. Maybe, a crow. Old country even in the new world. Away from the city. Away from towns. Small communities. Simple streets. More roads. Hours from the city.

Small town. Old streets. More trees than houses. Nameless gas station. Stopping at the grocery. Little more than an extension of the gas station. They stood. Stretching. Standing next to the car. Watching for people's faces. Going to the grocery. Purchasing prepackaged sandwiches little better than cotton wool. Chips. Water. Few words for strangers. Returning to the car. Paul and Andrew exchanging silent thoughts over the roof before opening their doors. Driving on. Away from the small island of town. Following roads that were little more than paths. Not much wider than the car.

Finding one house like an abandoned shell left by the side of the road. Lost. Forlorn. Forgotten. Watching it by the late afternoon sun. Car still running. Muttering quietly to itself. Andrew silenced the engine. Paul stood, watching the house. Leaning against the car. Andrew walked to the trunk, following the road with his eyes. Looking this way and that. Opened the back. Paul joined him. They took walking sticks from the trunk looking very much like wooden swords. A bundle of thin metal spikes each a foot long tied together with string. Andrew lifted a heavy shoulder bag.

Leaving the car unlocked, they approached the house. Walking as if they did not want it to realize it was their destination. Drifting sideways. There was once a path to the door. Overgrown. No driveway. No garage. Half the windows boarded over. Old dirt on the stoop. Continuing to walk almost sideways. They slowly circled the place. Broken doghouse. Paint faded to the color of bleached wood. Grass as tall as bushes. No sound. Two cars.

They froze, watching the cars as if they were alive. Nothing stirred. Trace of wind to brush the grass. There was no sound.

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Paul walked slowly to the first car. Did not touch it. Old car looking all but new. Closed windows. Locked doors. Cold engine. Ignored for days. Longer. Andrew circled to the second car, watching the back of the house. Screen door smeared with dirt. The car was empty. Maybe, trash on the backseat. Floor. Resembling pieces of crumpled paper tossed about by the wind.

They continued around the house. Dirty and dusty. Silent afternoon. No birds. No whisper of insect voices. Maybe, the breeze among the trees. Back around to the front. Watching the house. Watching the road. Listening patiently for the distant rumble of cars. They started once more around the house, walking slowly. Donning rawhide gloves as they approached the back door. Andrew took a large black rubber mallet from the shoulder bag. Opened the screen. Tried the door. Forced the door.

Kitchen. Smell of slowly rotting food on the stale warm air. Grocery bags on the counter. Unwashed dishes in the sink. Dirty pans on the stove. Looking as if dishes and pans were used and used and used. Never cleaned. Searching every shelf and drawer for more pots and pans. Using everything rather than cleaning anything. Letting the pile grow. Overflow the sink. The counter. Covering every surface rather than washing. Paul and Andrew crossed to the dining room. Table askew as if unexpectedly pushed. Piles of books. Hardbound. Open to random pages. Scattered candles. Toppled chairs.

No furniture in the living room. Markings on the floor. Overlapping circles. Patterns and symbols resembling writing. All smeared with dried blood as if sprayed randomly about the room. Sudden fountains jerking about. Leaving odd shapes and patterns. Scent of old blood.

Paul and Andrew did not move. Watched the living room from beside the dining room table. Looked to melted remnants of candles among the patterns and markings. Tossed and scattered. Kicked about. Smear of blood at their feet as if something had been dragged back into the living room.

No bodies. No clothes. Disfigured sketches on the floor. Scattered candles. Solidified smears of wax. Burn marks in the wood. Blood. Dry. Caked blood. No people. No bodies. As if they did not exist. As if they should find ghost shadows and outlines blast-

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ed into the walls. Faint memories of living things. But, nothing. No bodies. No people. Only traces of blood. Smear toward the center of the chalk pattern like water rushing toward a drain.

Paul took a cross from the bag. Intricately carved from a walrus tusk and so finely detailed that the figure of Christ appeared to be actively pulling away from his bonds. Writhing as if the cross burned. Paul held it toward the patterns on the floor as if holding a shield. Muttering a prayer under his breath as if to do more than whisper was to howl at the moon. Nothing happened. Andrew slid the shoulder bag to the floor. Found a carton of table salt within. Broke the seal. Nothing happened. He began to pace around the pattern as if walking on ice, leaving a trail of salt. Walking stick balanced over one shoulder. And, nothing happened. Back at Paul's side, Andrew watched the pattern. Carton dropping to the floor. Whispers slipping into silence. They watched the pattern in its salt circle. Christ looking at Paul's shoes. And, nothing happened.

They left the edge of the living room. Searching the house. They found bed rooms. A bathroom. Converted study. Clothes in the bedrooms. Unmade sleeping bags where there should have been beds. Camping indoors. Canvas suitcases. Duffel bags. Half-open as if the contents had been crawling, clawing at freedom. Dying wherever they lay upon the floor. Withered candles. Pools of wax. The discarded remnants of food. Cups. Flattened bag of chips. Crumpled pages from old newspapers. Battered notebook. Well thumbed diary. Another. Lantern. Batteries from a flashlight.

They took the diaries and notebook back to the dining room. Looking over the table. Old books. Looking to the pattern in the living room. Studying the salt circle. Making sure it had not moved. Twisted or stretched as if blown by the wind. Scuffed by hands or feet. The salt remained untroubled and untouched.

Still carrying one of the diaries, they returned to the car. Moved it behind the house. Parking next to the forgotten cars. Hidden from the road. They watched the house, sitting in the car, as the twilight drifted. The light slipping toward dark. Sky painted the color of dry blood. Same as the living room. Fading. Paul holding the diary tight in his hand.

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"The third one," Andrew said. Hands on the wheel. "This is the third one."

"I know."

"In how many months? Four? Six?"

"I know."

"We could have stopped this. We should have stopped this."

"I know."

"The field teams. Nothing. They do nothing."

"I know. I know, Andrew."

"Gather information. Send us reports. Months out of date. Leave us to collect. Collate. Picking up the pieces. All we do is pick up the pieces. Like garbagemen. Trash collectors."

"They're doing the best they can. Spread so thin."

"Yes, spread thin. Excuse for inaction. Inattention. Cannot intercede or help because they must cover their territory. Fill quotas of information. Rumors. Lies. Reports spread so thin."

"We need their reports."

"Cowards."

"If the house had taken them. If the field men were dragged down every dark hole they found. What reports would we have?"

"Their disappearance."

"Oh, really? Where exactly? In all their territory? Resources squandered combing that territory to find the one hole that may have closed behind them."

"Spread so thin," Andrew said. Hand on chin. Watching the house. "Increase their numbers."

"From where exactly? Recruitment drive? And where do the resources for that come from? Do we pull people out of the field to find and train people for the field? Where does that leave us exactly?"

"It used to be so easy."

"Oh, yes, it used to be. It always used to be."

"Yes, always. How many people follow crop circles alone?"

"Oh, that's a good group to recruit from. Pro-fantasy personalities, the lot of them. Fooled by hoaxes. And, how many would have the stomach to face such a thing that could make a crop circle if it wished?"

"You know what I mean, Paul."

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"Yes, I do."

The sunlight shifted. Faded. Dried blood to lightning scar black.

"Don't have the stomach?" Andrew said. "Never have the patience."

"Three in four months."

"Four. Five. Six months." Andrew hit the steering wheel. "And, the creature that took Nicholas. Too soon. Too soon."

"Swarms happen."

"Information clumping exasperating swarms. We need more reports. More feet on the ground."

"If only we could recruit crop circle followers. Ghost hunters."

"Fools. To think that spirits and soul stuff would linger. Stupid. Try to communicate. Levitate random objects. Hokum. Hogwash."

"Paranormal investigators. If only they knew. Do you ever try watching those shows?"

"Never."

"Never the monster hunters, true. Cryptozoologists. Those are dangerous. Like swimming naked with piranha while smeared with blood. They could summon—"

"Why we never talk about them," Andrew said, almost shouting, pointing a finger.

Paul held the diary tightly closed. Looked to the dark house. Stars filtering slowly into the sky.

"Makes it hard to understand reports, doesn't it?" Paul said.

"Enough to drive a body insane. Interpreting oblique references. Poetry is easier."

"The things we study are enough to drive one crazy. The reports don't help. Feeding one upon the other perhaps."

"Vicious circle. Doesn't help recruitment."

"Oblique recruiting. We should advertise on those paranormal hunter shows."

"Advertise on TV?"

"Attract the wrong element, sure, but we would get some hits. Our calling draws people to the paranormal because they don't know enough to understand the truth."

"We can't talk about the truth."

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"Yes, you said."

"We can't."

"Yes?"

"Why not just produce our own show?"

"What?"

"Forget advertising."

"Our own show?"

"Control the message."

"That's brilliant."

"Not ghosts or spirits."

"Ghost adjacent."

"Hunting the things that really do go bump in the night."

"We could say vampires. Frankenstein's monster. Think of the ratings."

"Yes, people love vampires. Nobody has to know they are fake. It'll get us the attention while not talking about what's really out there."

Light streaking through the house, engulfing it. They froze. The light drifted. Slipped sideways. Sliding over and away from the house. Drifting just as suddenly back into darkness. They sat. Breathing hard. The world silent. Darkness. Nothing happened. Starlight. Moonlight. And, nothing happened.

"I hate cars," Paul said.

"High-beams. There must be another house out this way."

"I hope so."

They sat, listening to their own hearts, and nothing happened.

"Right," Paul said. "No television show."

"No talking of any kind."

"Hard to recruit."

"Very hard."

"And, yet, we must."

"What I've been saying," Andrew said.

They sat, watching the house. Sleeping in the car. Seats pushed back. Thin blankets. Letting the dark night drift around them. Nothing disturbed them except the dawn.



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They entered the house by the morning's light. Checking the salt circle. Carrying books from the dining room back to the car. Piling them on the backseat. Taking paint-thinner, turpentine, gasoline into the house. Soaking the living room. Scattering more salt. Around the edges. Over the pattern. Enough to look as if it had snowed indoors. Setting one final jug at the edge of the dining room. Prepping a kitchen timer. Soaked rags. Lighter. Roadside flare. They returned to the car. Stopped down the road. Watched the house until they could see flames through the front window. Drove away.

Paul behind the wheel. Andrew watching the world slip by. The small town. Nameless gas station. Nothing to see. Faded. Blurring together. The long road out the window. Fields. Trees. Roads. Another town little more than random streets stitched together. More fields. Tall grass. Cows.

"Three circles," Andrew said. Silence from Paul. "Three empty circles in so few months. Empty. Abandoned but for the blood. No reason."

"The books will tell."

"Madness waits in those diaries."

"Answers, too, perhaps."

"Answers." Trees like rows of sentries guarding the road. Losing shape. Blurring past. "Not a coincidence. Can't be."

"We will learn."

"Like interpreting non-rationale verse. Madness beckons there."

"Madness everywhere." Lifting a hand from the steering wheel. "Look, madness."

"Cannot be just a coincidence."

"They could be. Reading the same books. Watching the same shows."

"They're connected."

"Six degrees."

"I've been thinking."

"Madness, Andrew. Madness."

"I have been thinking." Andrew raised a hand to his face. Brushed his forehead as if shielding his eyes from the sun. "What if we're not alone."

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"I'm not following the logic here."

"Millennium cults. Suicide cults."

"Oh, them. They never get their act together."

"What if they did? What if some outfit. Like us. Secretive. Planning. Cunning."

"Diaries will tell. Not all the sites left diaries."

"Diaries may not know. They may not have known. Directed. Guided. Planning. Cunning."

"Are you saying that ghost hunter shows are a plot?"

"No."

"You're talking paranoid, you know. Many flavors of madness."

"What do we do, Paul? What do we do day in and day out?"

Few cars on the road. None when they had first greeted the early morning light. More as they had driven through small towns. More as they approached the city.

"We look for connections," Paul said.

"It might not be madness."

"Doesn't make it true, either. I'm not sensing enough in common between our three sites. Outside the obvious."

"No trace save the blood."

"Isolated locations. Patterns on the floor. Chalk is cheap. What's wrong with them?"

"Someone put them up to it, that's what."

"Always a possibility. They all read the same stupid books."

"We would know if such a book was making the rounds. College campuses. Conventions. We would know."

"We also tend to know after the fact. We're like their parents when it comes to trends. Rock bands."

"We have to get ahead of this."

"Agreed."

"Know if there is a conspiracy against us."

"No argument."

"I want to consult the ladies."

"Oh."

The road had become a highway at some point. Long. Straight. Four lanes. Paul made a show of studying a rest-stop sign as they drove past.

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"We have to get ahead of this, Paul. If there's something there. Not as many as we used to be. What if we're opposed?"

"Running low on gas."

"What if a millennium cult finally has its act together? Look at the world, Paul. We have to get ahead of this. Stop spreading salt on circles that have already been drawn."

"We should fill up at the next rest-stop. Stretch our legs."

"Three already. That we know of. Three. And, Nicholas."

"Or, Matthew. Not that long ago."

"I had forgotten." Fingertip on his lips. "Seems like such a long time."

Silence of the road. Tires rolling forever over blacktop.

"Asking the ladies," Paul said. "That's no small thing."

"I know."

"We speak of madness."

"I know."

"Joke about it."

"I know what I'm asking, Paul."

"Do you? I'm responsible for them. Well, as responsible as anyone can be for them."

"Which is why I'm asking you."

"Oh, are you?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Douglas won't like it."

"Douglas doesn't like anything."

"Not entirely true, Andrew."

"He's a fool. Coward. Prefers research. Anything he can find in a book."

"Research does so little for us then, does it?"

"He's weak. Why we are weak. Hiding in that library. Surrounding himself with sycophants and cowards. Drawn to the false safety of the library, the lot of them. Wall of bodies. Feeding one upon the other. Blind to the world."

"Such nice things to say about the first among our company."

"Remind me of turkeys."

"Of course they do."

"Frightened turkeys huddle. Pushing together in such a mass

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that they crush the one in the center. That's Douglas for you. Smothered by frightened turkeys."

"He's just as fond of you, too. Lucky I'm responsible for the ladies. Won't like it. Lucky me."

"But, you will grant me an audience."

"Beth won't like it, either."

"Let me worry about Beth. She'll understand."

"But will she forgive me? There's understanding and there's acceptance."

"We have to get ahead of this, Paul. She'll understand."

"I hope so. I like her. Sarah likes her. Good friends. I'll hear about this for months."

"Better me than you then. Imagine Sarah if you asked."

"Imagine? I'm responsible for them. How do you think Sarah feels? You consult them."

"Thank you."

"That's not what. Not my answer. Have to give this some thought."

"There's a conspiracy out there. Trying to crush us. Bring about the end of the world."

"Bit of a stretch, don't you think?"

"I hope so. But, we have to know. Worth risking a little bit of sanity. Matrimonial harmony. She'll understand. Sarah will understand."

"Give this some thought," Paul said, watching the road. Cars grouping. Traffic growing. As they approached the city. As they made their way home.



Andrew and Beth shared a bed. Reading before sleep. Propped-up on pillows. Only light from the bedside table. Andrew holding reports together with a clip. Resting them against a yellow legal pad. Pen in hand. Beth closed her book.

"You've been so quiet," she said.

Andrew rested his face against her hair. Eyes closed.

"I don't want to sound like a broken record."

"What you and Paul found in the country."

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"Different." Leaned back against his pillow. "Hard to talk about what we found because it forms its own pattern. Association. Like thinking about pink elephants."

"You mean not thinking about pink elephants."

"No. Not exactly. It's like thinking about pink elephants makes you think about pink elephants. See them everywhere. One day you're not just seeing pink elephants everywhere. They are actually there."

"That doesn't. If they are there, you can't see them?"

"Analogies are for hoarding cows. You know what I mean."

"Metaphors."

"Yes."

"Herding."

"I know. Not my point. You know what I mean."

"I've heard the explanation before. Pink elephants. I know."

"Not what. Bothering me."

Beth was silent.

"It's the same story I told you before," Andrew said. "The same story I'm always telling you. We should have known. We could have prevented this. If only the field teams. If only there were more of us. If only we weren't such weaklings and cowards."

"You're not a broken record."

"Paul and I were talking about advertising on TV."

"What?"

"Maybe on one of those vampire shows. Lots of people watch those. Start our own show if we had to."

"No."

"Well, we weren't really serious. Just venting. Lack of resources. Lack of motivation among the field teams. Fear. Low morale." He ran his hand down Beth's arm. Fingers brushing together. "What we really need is someone to crack the whip. Leadership. Decisive action. Light a fire under Douglas for a start."

"He listens to you."

"Oh, I wouldn't say. He. We don't. Let's say that Douglas and I don't necessarily agree on the best allocation of company resources. Don't know how many more times I can have that conversation."

"One more, at least."

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"I don't. Get sent enough times into the field as is. One reason to have so few intercept teams in the area. Forces me to travel. Face the hazards of the field."

"We don't want that."

"I will not stand by."

"I wish."

"What?"

"Every time you go out. Every night you spend away. Is this it?"

"I will always come back."

"Will Paul show up on our doorstep? Or worse. Someone I've never met before. With flowers or a personal letter signed by Douglas himself? Is this one lonely night the first of the rest of my life?"

"Look at me."

"There's got to be a better way."

"Look at me."

"Argue until you are blue in the face. Light a damn fire under Douglas. Demand a promotion. Transfer to research. Archives. Anything that keeps you out of the field."

"I will always come back."

"How many times do you have to come back? Everything you've done for the company. To be sent into the field again and again and again."

"They don't order me into the field."

"You just said."

"They don't order me."

"Not in so many words. You just said. They're jealous, is that it?"

"What?"

"They don't want you to demand what's yours. They want your silence. Keep sending you again and again and again into the field until you don't come back."

"Nonsense."

"You just said you can't stand up to Douglas. He'll punish you. He is punishing you for everything you've done."

"I don't know that," Andrew said. "We're just talking. Venting. Stuff and nonsense. I said I didn't want to sound like a broken record."

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"I just want you safe."

"I will always come back."

"Say it."

"I will always come back."

"Tell me you will be safe."

"We take every precaution. I will be safe."

"I want you to come back."

"I will always come back."

"Make me believe it."

"Believe it. I love you. I have every reason to come back."

"Believe it."

"Say you love me."

"I love you. Always come back. Promise."

"Always."

"Promise."

"I will always come back."

"I love you," Beth said.

"I love you."



Douglas sat at the long table. Chair pushed back. Sitting upon the very edge. Turning pages of a hard-bound book the size of an unabridged dictionary. More books on the table. Carefully stacked. Organized by size rather than content. Bookshelves filling two walls. Uniform rows of books like old-fashioned encyclopedias. Notes taped to their spines. Index cards sticking out from between volumes. Portraits arranged on the third wall. Oil paintings of serious men, wearing dark and serious clothing. Gray haired men looking not so much as if they had grown old but as if old age had been thrust upon them.

"More like this one," Douglas asked.

"Yes," Paul replied.

"Interesting." Douglas ran a finger down the page as if speed-reading. "They were not trying to summon anything."

"No?"

"It was a divination."

"It didn't work."

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"Dangerous thing, looking for the future. Seeking information from unnatural sources. The future looks back, you could say."

"I'm vaguely familiar with divinations and such things. Being somewhat responsible for practitioners of the art." Paul glanced at Andrew. Looked back to the page. "Are you sure they were seeking the future? I've seen examples of divination, and it is nothing like this."

"Oh, they may have been misguided in the attempt, but the diaries were quite clear. Concerned about the state of the world. Worried about the future. They sought answers in desperate places. Got in over their heads. It's a common enough story."

"So common as to be rather unbelievable," Andrew asked.

"Planted?" Douglas looking at him. "A cover story?"

"Doubtful enough, true, but not impossible. Attempting something dangerous, but they don't really want people to know what. If they're discovered. If their bodies were discovered, more likely."

"No, that's not consistent with your report. Doesn't match anything in the diaries. To go to such trouble preparing false documents on the off chance they might be discovered? Doubtful."

"Operation Barclay."

"That takes me back. Remember reading about it in school. Quite morbid. Almost didn't work. Look, are you really suggesting deception on such a grand scale?"

"Andrew only meant that the diaries may be unreliable," Paul said.

"Be that as may be, the preponderance of the evidence points toward a misguided attempt to see what dreams may come. The arcane books. The markings on the floor. They sought hope in knowledge of the future. What they hoped to accomplish by knowing the future is a lot less clear. I don't think they knew."

"Unwise to seek the future without a clear vision of what you intend to do." Paul glanced once more at Andrew. "Lack of planning. Lack of focus. Lack of intent. It is a disaster waiting to happen."

"Unfortunate." Douglas closed the book. Slowly. Carefully. "We try to discourage such things."

"It is the state of the world. Young people are naturally inse-

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cure about such things at the best of times. Easily drawn into tragic stupidities like this one. We're sure they were young people?"

"Without a doubt. Or as little doubt as our unreliable diaries will suggest. College age seems to bring out the most interest in unnatural theories. A willingness to experiment with occult mysticism and nonsense. Time and place for everything."

"I'm forever grateful that they do not manage to kill themselves more often."

"Or accidentally bring about the end of the world."

"I try not to think about that one."

"It is rather unlikely, true. We do what we can to prevent their accidental deaths. I'm surprised your friend has shown such restraint on the subject of our success rate. He is quite opinionated on the topic, you know."

They watched Andrew. Paul said nothing. Douglas rested his hand on the book, tapping his finger as if gently rapping upon a door.

"You know my mind on the subject, as you say," Andrew finally said. "I did not wish to be disrespectful by simply repeating myself."

"And yet by your actions. Silence in this case. You reveal that you have not considered any position other than your own. Given no thought to the possibilities. You show disrespect, all the same."

"Such was not my intent. I have considered the possibilities. I did not think this was the right time or place to speak. Agree or disagree."

"Yet, you hold your own position as true. It is because you do not understand. There are many factors I must consider in any decision. Management of the whole company. From your limited position, you do not understand how something that looks unwise to you may yield great benefit elsewhere."

"We're all aware," Paul said, trailing away into silence under Douglas' gaze.

"When you are first of the company, you may make any decision you like. Consider or ignore any ramifications that you like. It's like a great web, our company. Pull the wrong string and all comes crashing down. Given the arguments you have made."

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Douglas looked to Andrew. "I am grateful that you will never be first of the company."



"Everything I have done, Paul. Everything I have done for the company."

"I know, Andrew. I know."

"The sacrifices I have made."

"I know."

"It's like none of it matters."

"I know."

"What have you done for us lately."

"Fickle."

"I could have sat around on my asterisk the whole time. Hidden in the library. Same result."

"Never could have lived with yourself though."

"That's the point. And, did I say anything in there? Did I speak out? What did I say that was so hard?"

"Well, you did kind-of challenge his authority."

"Never."

"Oh, you did unfortunately."

"I kept my opinions to myself. Said not one word about the disposition of resources. Not one on the number of researchers."

"You didn't have to. There's more than one. Look, you said the diaries were a con."

"What?"

"You went on about Operation Barclay."

"So?"

"Well, he had just finished saying the diaries spelled out one thing, and you said another."

"Just keeping all possibilities on the table."

"It was spitting in his face, and you know it."

"Rubbish."

"Andrew."

"He was right about one thing."

"Yes?"

"If I was first, things would be different."

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"But you're not."

"But if I was."

"Nobody would support you, Andrew. You're not wresting authority away from Douglas."

"Says you."

"You're too outspoken. Would upset too many apple-carts. Douglas is well liked."

"He's an idiot and a coward."

"That's your problem. People like things the way they are. They like being researchers. Makes them feel important. Makes them feel safe."

"Cowards."

"You're not winning any friends here. You'll never be first, Andrew."

"Such confidence and support."

"Drop it."

"It's just talk."

"It's never just talk, Andrew. As our little meeting with Douglas just now should have shown you. It's never just talk."

"Still doesn't make it right."

"I know, Andrew. I know. But, it's what we've got."

"Yeah."

"Go home. Cool off. Get some rest."

"Yeah."

"Just keep your head down and try to keep quiet for once. Let things blow over a bit. Give them a reason to remember the good you have done for this company. Douglas is not blind to the fact we're spread thin."

"I'll have to take your word for that."

"Let it be, man. You're not making things any easier on me, either."

"Douglas doesn't have to know."

"Oh, that's brilliant. We'll be joined at the hip. I'm not walking down that path, and I still haven't made my decision. Remember that."

"We need to know if there's a conspiracy."

"Project Barclay, I know. But, that's not the only way."

"Time's an issue."

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"It hasn't been twenty-four hours," Andrew said. "You know the drill. Can't draw attention. That includes numbers. Speed. Direction. We must saunter even when we wish to run."

"The danger."

"Must remain unaware. We're hunters. Remember that. Not the police. Not like an army."

"You speak of danger," Paul said. "How much more the danger if we spook our quarry?"

"We're nowhere near. The middle of the train station. How can it?"

"Quiet," Andrew said. "Trust us when we say a thing."

"Speaking of train stations," Paul said. "We draw attention simply by standing still. You have a car?"

"Yes," Jason said. They followed him.

"How long have you been with us," Paul asked.

"Years."

"In what capacity? You sound like a rookie."

"Field teams. I know what I'm doing, but I wanted to do more than ask questions."

"Questions are important, but I'm glad you wanted a more active role. Most field teams never want to get involved."

"I couldn't stand by. I wanted to make a difference."

"We all want to do our part. How many intercepts have you been on?"

"None. None that amounted to anything."

"Firefighters have a saying. Never wish for fire. I'm sorry about your partner. Jacob was a good man."

Silence.

"You're a good man, Jason," Andrew said. "Intercept gone bad. Most rookies never come back."

"I'm no coward. Jesus called me to this duty. I will not betray his sacred trust."

"None of us wound."

They reached the car. Put their bags in the trunk. Jason drove. The train station left far behind. An hour on the road. Traffic. Highway. City streets. Old part of town. Away from anything. Industrial district. Factories. Warehouses. Wood like dry skin. Pipes like bone. More trucks than cars. Few even of those.

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Broken fence. Gate leaning like a drunk held up by a pole. Cracked blacktop. Grass like dead wheat. Weeds like fire. Frozen. Burning through the concrete. Reaching for the sky. Rusted car. Lost between the gate and the road. Tires long forgotten. Half-caved roof. Eaten through. Warehouse. Spliced with half a factory. Broken windows. Dirt and dust. Color lost to time. They rolled to the loading dock. Bulk of the building between them and the road. Quiet muttering of the engine suddenly silenced.

Paul and Andrew climbed from the car. Still wearing suits. Paul in brown. Andrew in gray. White shirts. Black ties. Comfortable shoes polished midnight black. They walked to the trunk. Jason following them. They took out the sports-bags. Donning raw-hide gloves. Taking walking sticks like staffs. Walrus-tusk crucifix. Handed a gallon jug to Jason. Liquid like orange juice mixed with maple syrup. Gave Jason dirty rags wrapped haphazardly around a metal rod.

Andrew hefted a sports-bag to his shoulder. They climbed stone steps to the loading dock. Door hanging limp as if its spine had been shattered. Open beyond. Darkness streaked with sunlight. Chains dangling as if from mid-air. Swaying gently as if softly sleeping. Puddles of stale water. Green. Brown. Silence. Concrete floor. Broken crate like a desiccated corpse. Another. Moldy. And, another. Smell of damp dust everywhere.

Another door. Small window inset. Broken glass. Hallway beyond. Dark. More concrete floors. Walking slowly. Jason pointing the way. Paul carrying the crucifix as if it was a floodlight. Passing rows of offices. Half-glass doors. Old words. Occasionally, a chair or table within. A desk. Office chair growing spoiled rings. Musty smell. Damp. Old. Dirty. Shredded cobwebs.

Another hallway. More offices. Break-room. Another hallway. Storage room. Factory floor. Ancient conveyer belt. Another hall. Darkness like twilight. Drifting toward midnight. Sound. Like a whisper. Violin played too low and too fast. Skidding across the strings.

They froze. Andrew and Paul watching the hallway as if going over a map. Learning every crack. Studying every irregularity in the broken floor. Piles of cobwebs and dust like miniature tum-

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bleweeds. They inched forward. Watching every door. Crushed can on the floor. Violin whispering louder. Faster.

Smell. Tickling the nose. Like compost. Half-baked mud. Rotten apple-cores. Inching forward. Violin faster. Mosquitoes buzzing right behind the ear. Step. Stench of putrefying flesh. Slowly burning. Step. Week-old vomit and bile.

More shape than shadow. Darkness in darkness. Shivered. More mass of flesh than body. Partially liquified. Shifting under a thick membrane. Skin. Matted fur. Hair. Tangled. Wet. Clotted blood. Limbs like a spider.

Paul threw up. Jason screamed. Andrew ran. Grabbed Paul. Ran. Down the hallway. Another. Jason before him. Screaming. Office. Table. Buzzing. Distant violin. Paul leaning against a table. Coughing. Gagging. Andrew slapped Jason hard. Screaming. Punched him in the stomach. Doubled-over. Crying. Gasping for putrid air. Andrew turned. Hand to Paul's shoulder. Still hunched against the table. Retching on air. Spitting.

"Oh, God," Paul said. "Oh, God." Dry-heaving. "Give me strength."

"I've lost my bag," Andrew said, turning slowly around.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Though I walk through the valley of shadow, I will fear no evil for he is with me. His rod and staff comfort me."

"We'll have to make do." Andrew turned. Jason had crumpled to the floor. Violins buzzing quickly. Scrapping slowly closer. Distant smell of roasting hair. "Get up," he said, touching Jason.

"I shall not want," Paul whispered. Wiping his face. "Fear no evil." Spitting.

"Get up," Andrew said. Jason shivered. "Blessed is he who shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children."

"Where's the bag?" Paul said.

Jason uncovered his face.

"We have work to do," Andrew said.

"Where's the cross?" Paul spun in a tight circle.

Andrew helped Jason stand. Buzzing in their ears. Asthmatic tiger. Drawing ragged breath. Rotten eggs like a bubbling claypot. Burned earth and hair.

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"Thank God for small miracles," Andrew picked up the gallon jug. Lifted the rag torch. "Lighter in my pocket."

Paul pulled at the knot in his tie. Yanking at his shirt. Violins straining. Louder. He broke the button at his collar. Struggled with a chain around his neck. Andrew handed the jug to Jason. Sound like a sack full of mud being dragged in fits and stops down the hallway. Labored, desperate breathing. Heavy as smoke. Andrew found one of the walking sticks. Paul lifted a small crucifix from benefit his shirt. Simple. Stainless steel.

"Give me strength," Paul said. "Guess I haven't been spending as much time in the field as I thought."

"We make do." Andrew tested the staff, swinging it about like a sword.

Stumbling sound of a heavy sack being scraped across the floor stopped. Breathing drowning in its own phlegm. Andrew handed the rag torch to Paul. Found the lighter. Dragging the sack of mud. Violin buzzing as if it would explode. Andrew lit the torch. Watched the flame grow.

"Once more," Paul said, lifting the torch.

"Into the valley of darkness." Andrew looked to Jason. Looked to the door.

The hallway was dark. As if the torch was casting shadows instead of light. Empty corridor. Rasping breath. Trembling violin. Blackness like mold growing on the walls. More growth toward the sound. Bend in the hallway. More toward the stench.

They inched toward darkness. Stepping toward decay. Passing doorways. Offices lost in black shadow. It wasn't a hand touching the wall where the hallway turned. The paint turning black as if ink was staining the very spot where the thing touched. They froze, Paul and Andrew. Watching. Paul holding the torch high. Hand on the crucifix at his throat. Waiting.

Slithering forward. Limb first. Like a giant spider's leg. Violin blazing. Stench burning. Barely restrained mass of flesh writhing forward like a serpent trying to shed its skin. Black. Glistening. Flailing.

"Back!" Andrew shouted, raising the staff. "In the Lord's name, I command you!"

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Spider legs moved. Touched floor and walls. Ceiling. The darkness slipped forward.

"By the power of Christ!" Andrew stepped toward it.

Stench everywhere. Thin limbs pulled. Body slipped along the floor.

"Hail Mary, full of grace." Paul held out the burning torch. "The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of they womb, Jesus."

Sigh like twenty men moaning slightly out of sync.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

Mass of fleshy darkness shuddered.

"Amen," Paul said.

The shape fell backward, as if collapsing back into itself.

"Mother of God," Andrew said.

The spider limbs struggled. Losing their grip on the walls. Finding new purchases. Pushing away from them. Slithering backward.

"By the power of Christ!"

It fell away. Limbs flailing. Lashing out.

"The power of Christ!"

Andrew swung the staff. Blocking limbs flailing at them. Reaching for the torch. Body pulsing as the staff struck a limb. Blubbering like a drowning infant.

"The power of Christ!"

Waving the torch like a flag. Pushing with the staff. Darkness stumbling. Falling. Leaning against a half-open door.

"The Lord is with thee!"

Slipping as if falling into the office. Long limbs like spider legs gripping the door-frame. Voices moaning. Violins screaming. Stench thick as mist. Andrew struck at the limbs like so many fingertips.

"Begone!"

It slithered across the office. Limbs flailing. Desk turned black as if being eaten by mold and decay. Collapsed under the mass of flesh.

"Jason." Andrew turned. Held out his hand. Jason was hug-

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ging the jug to his chest. Andrew took it. "Get the bag. Down the hallway." He pushed. Shoved. "Go. Go."

Jason stumbled. Then, ran past the door. Disappearing. The torch was the only light.

Andrew turned back to the doorway. Paul was reciting a prayer. Like a chant. Words slipping together. Andrew opened the jug. Smell of kerosine. Gasoline.

The thing of flesh and hair was writhing as if slipping on oil and mud. Limbs flailing. Lashing the walls. Ceiling. Smashing a chair. Ripping it apart.

"In the name of God," Andrew said, splashing the room.

The violins screamed. The shape rose. Taller than a bear. Striking the ceiling. Andrew doused more of the room. Mingling smells of bile, rotten flesh and gasoline. Limbs pinwheeled. Bitter voices moaned and cried. Andrew looked down the hall.

"Jason, what's taking so long?" He looked back to the thing. "Jason!"

He scanned the room. Looking. Watched limbs strike and grab just inside the doorway. He looked to the hall. Up and down the floor. Looked to Paul watching the creature and muttering prayers. Their eyes met. Paul looked past him down the hall where Jason had disappeared.

Shuffling sounds as if all the spider legs were being gathered beneath the body. Andrew looked to his hands. His sleeves. Smelling of kerosine. Violins dying. Tapping. Tap-dancing filled the room. Andrew had his suit coat off. Twisted it into a bundle. Paul lowered the torch. Coat caught fire. Andrew threw it. Wiping at his hands. Coat fluttered. Drifted toward the thing. Fire spread. Engulfing the chair. Sweeping over the desk. Embracing the dark shape. Moans. Whispers. Strings died. Smoke. Stench of burning flesh and hair. Like watching a wicker man burn.

Andrew turned back to the hallway.

"Jason!"

He looked to Paul. Locked gazes. Paul didn't slow his chant, holding the burning brand. Nodded his head once. Andrew ran down the hall. As if his eyes were closed. Only light the distant fire. Found the crucifix. Picked it up. Held it like a torch. Found the bag.

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"Though I walk through shadow," Andrew said, searching the bag with his hands. "I will fear no evil." Found a flashlight. "For the Lord, my God, is with me."

He scanned the hall with the flashlight. Found Jason huddled against the wall. Curled as if he was being poked with a stick.

"Jason!" Andrew ran to him. "The Lord is thy shepherd," he said, kneeling. "Thou shall not want." Reaching out.

"It's wrong. It's all wrong," Jason whispered. All but moaning.

"Where? Show me?"

"It can't be. It can't be."

"Show me, man." Andrew looked back down the hallway. Toward Paul. Toward the burning darkness that would soon engulf the whole office. Consume the room. Spread to the hall.

"It can't be. It's all wrong. It can't be. It can't be."

"Jason, you have been gifted with a sacred trust." Fire would fill the hallway.

"Nothing looks like that."

"The Lord is thy rod and thy staff." Flames would block their escape. "You have to show me. You have to show me now."

"There." Jason tried to point.

Andrew looked to the office. Broken door. Shattered frame. Left the flashlight at Jason's feet. Andrew went back for the bag. Lifted it to his shoulder. Held the engraved crucifix tight in one hand. The staff in the other. Walked to the door. Jason watching him from the corner of his arm.

Andrew pushed at the fragments of door. The room was dark. Shadowed. Strangely, not black. Almost shapes. Almost smoke. Empty. No desk. No tables. No chairs. No pictures on the walls. Flashes of silver. Andrew turned. Went back for the flashlight. Brought light to the room. Staggered back.

Markings everywhere. On the floor. On the walls. Circles and circles of circles. Patterns and designs. Chalky white. All but glowing. More patterns covering every open space. Writing. Strange scribbles in alien tongues.

Andrew lowered the bag. Slowly put down the crucifix. Took a carton of salt from the bag. Made a thick line of it just inside the door-frame as if marking the foundation for a wall.

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"Oh, Mary, mother of God," he whispered. "Blessed art thou. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

He took a small juice bottle from the bag. Jason watching him. Andrew pulled the top. Whispering all the while. Scent of kerosene. He took a rag from the sports-bag. Stuffed the end into the juice bottle. Watched the end grow damp. Fished in his pocket for the lighter. Set fire to the rag. Tossed the bottle into the room. Flames spread, washing over the patterns.

He took another small bottle from the bag. Cracked the top. Tossed it underhand into the room. Fire grew like lightning. Engulfing the floor. Touching the walls. Another bottle. Broke the seal. Flung it at the far wall. Flames spread like splattered paint.

He turned to the bag.

"Only one left," Andrew said. Looked to Jason. Sitting unaided. Watching him. Andrew looked back to the room. Watched the flames. Stood. Shouldered the bag. Handed the cross to Jason.

They walked quickly all but running. The flashlight guiding them. Smoke in the hall. Distant moaning. Little more than mist. Stench like a sledgehammer. Paul standing in the hall. Watching the doorway framed in fire. Holding the torch. Black smoke staining the ceiling.

They kept walking. Paul dropped the torch. Walking quickly. Turning the corner. Loud bang behind them as the gallon jug exploded. They continued walking, trying not to run. Twisting hallways. Finding windows. Sunlight streaked with dirt and dust. Distant smoke. They started following exit signs. Reached a door. Pushed. Chained. Locked from the outside.

"Bolt cutters?" Andrew said. Silence. "Jason!"

"I brought the flammables, remember?" Jason backed against the wall. "Couldn't bring on the train?"

"Did you see me repack bolt cutters?"

"Then, why are you asking me?"

"That's not what—"

"There's a way," Paul said. "There's always a way. Just retrace our steps. Fire won't spread that fast."

They started back, looking at the walls. Doorways. Twist in the hallway. Turning left instead of right. Walking. Watching for smoke. Wanting to keep it behind them. Ignoring signs. Find-

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ing the factory floor. Rusted conveyor belt. Walking quickly now. Hallway. Another. Great hall. Loading dock. Back door. Outside.

Down the steps. Sports-bag tossed onto the backseat beside Andrew. Sitting. Staring. Saying nothing. They sat in the car, watching the loading dock as if they expected something huge, monstrous, to smash through the gate at any moment.

"Maybe I should drive," Andrew said. Silence. "Jason?" No answer from the front seat. "You did very well. You know that." Nothing. "Such an intercept. Twice in two days."

"What's that smell?" Paul lifted his hands. "I smell." Pulled at his suit coat. "Spare shirt in my bag."

Paul climbed from the car. Left his door open. Went round to the back. Stood there for a minute. Came back to his door.

"Jason? Can you pop the trunk?" Silence. "The trunk?"

Jason looked to his hands held tight to the steering wheel as if he was coming out of a trance. Raised one hand, slowly. Moved it to the dash. Unlocked the trunk. Paul went back around. Raised the trunk. They could hear him rummaging in his sports-bag. Silence.

"It was like watching a movie in 3-D, right?" Andrew said. "Not like those picture books. Find the image if you just squint. Like the room was the wrong shape?" The trunk slammed shut. "Or, parts of it were floating in space like really bad 3-D?"

"It didn't make any sense," Jason said.

Paul climbed back into the car. Slammed the door.

"Sorry."

"Or, how could we see if there was no light, right?" Andrew said. "There had to be light, but there wasn't."

"But, you could tell something was there. The shape of it." Jason held up his hands, as if trying to restrain an invisible dove.

"It boggles the mind, no question," Andrew said. "Worse when it looks like something Escher painted."

"Escher? You mean people walking up stairs but never getting there because the bottom is also the top?"

"That's nothing. Just try making sense of a room where the front wall is also the back. Now, that'll mess with your head."

"I don't. I don't know what I saw."

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"Don't try to make sense of it. Doesn't do to dwell or try to remember. Best to let go."

"Yes, I can imagine."

"Look is there somewhere we can go? Rest? Rent a hotel room if we have to. Actually, we could probably all use coffee. Sugar. Late breakfast is probably not a bad idea. Donuts. You know, there's a reason cops are always hanging out at donut-shops. Not just a cliché. Sugar and caffeine."

"You just made that up."

"God's honest truth."

"I thought it was because they used to be twenty-four hours," Paul said.

"Well, I suppose. Still. Never underestimate the call of sugar and caffeine."

"I think I can find a coffee shop."

"Better not be one of those counter things."

"No, honest to God greasy spoon."

"Now, you're talking."

Jason started the car. Drove away. It was almost an hour before the smoke and flames were visible from the road.



"All right. What's so important that you had to wait until Jason was away from the table? It's not exactly as if we're alone."

"Then, I'll just have to whisper."

"Draws people's attention."

"More than shouting, actually. I am aware. A normal voice. Normal conversation. Just have to make do."

"You're stalling."

"The breach site? One Jason tripped over? I saw it, too."

"You, my friend, have an iron constitution. One look. That thing. And, I'm puking all over myself. Didn't even see the breach."

"Rupture wasn't exposed. Not when I looked, anyway. As for the shock."

"That's a nice way of putting it."

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"Don't spend enough time in the field, as you said. Too much time in the library. Caring for the ladies."

"Important work, that."

"Yes, it is."

"Remember that. Next time you ask."

"I'm getting round to that, actually."

"Really?"

"Yes. See. As I was saying, the breach site. There were markings."

"To be expected. People always summoning things."

"Markings were the same."

"The same?"

"Remember the divination? Patterns? Circles within circles? Saw the same patterns here. The breach site."

"That wasn't a summoning."

"They weren't going for a summoning. Divination breach was an accident. If the journals are to be believed."

"No reason to doubt the journals."

"Important part is the similarity in patterns. The same hands. Same direction. They're connected."

"Doubtful."

"Possible."

"Unlikely."

"But, we have to consider it. The possibility that they are connected. The same organization directing their actions. Setting events in motion."

"Similar patterns? How sure are you? How good a look do you think you got?"

"Enough."

"Sometimes, the breach causes the markings."

"True."

"It's no small thing. Consulting the ladies."

"I know."

"You never know the price until it's too late."

"I know."

"You have to tell Beth. Before."

"Promise."

"You'd better. I'll never hear the end of it."

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"I'll talk to Beth. First, we have to get back to the city."

"Yes, priorities. Our ride. Where is that rookie, anyway?"

"Shock finally caught-up with him."

"Well, you had better go look then. Remind him that we've got the coffee here."

"I'll do that."



Beth had abandoned her book, leaving it on top of the blankets. Her arm around Andrew, holding him. Resting her face against his shoulder. Disrupting his pile of papers.

"You've been so quiet," she said.

"Paperwork."

"You've been looking at the same pages without reading them. Trying to hide it. Passing from page to page. Picking one up. Holding it. Shuffling them around. So I won't notice."

"Have I?"

"Yes."

He tried to sink into the pillows propped against the headboard. Let a sigh escape him as if it was the end of the world.

"Tell me," she said.

"I don't know where to start."

"All that time in the field. You know I don't like it."

"I always come home."

"You always come home. You don't always come back. You're so far away right now. I can't even see you."

"I don't mean to be."

"Whatever is eating at your soul. I don't like it."

"Nor I."

"Not so far away, anymore. Come back."

"I don't know. I don't know how. I didn't even know I was gone."

"Why is the burden on your shoulders? They ask so much."

He pushed his face into her hair. Drank deep of flowers, baby-powder and cream.

"Sometimes," he said, leaning back, looking toward the ceil-

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ing. "I don't think they know what they ask. Sometimes, I don't think they care."

"The burden is not yours alone to bear. Don't let them give it all to you."

"Burden. Responsibility. I have." He covered his face. Rubbing as if he would press his eyes into his skull. "I have to tell you."

"What?"

"I don't know. Where to start." Hand stroking her hair. Down her arm. Finding her fingers. Linking them. "There's been activity. Similar. Coincidental. I don't know. I don't know."

"Nobody believes you?"

"It's not even that. We have to know. Are they related? Even if they are not. We have to know. If there's a conspiracy. Millennium cult."

"But, they're so disorganized. Can't hold it together. It's the nature of what they are. I've met them. They show up at the conservatory from time to time. Make noise. So important. So sad. I try not to laugh."

"But, what if. What if that's a front."

"They're nothing."

"Millennium cult may be a bad example. But, the idea. An organized group. Conspiracy. Arrayed against us. Call them a Millennium cult because people know what that is."

"A dangerous Millennium cult? Hard to imagine."

"Armageddon cult, then. Apocalypse. I don't care. Revelation."

"That's a good one. Revelation cult. Trying to reveal the end times through their actions. So much better even than Armageddon. Sounds so much like people crying that the end is coming. Rather than bringing it about."

"Even Millennium cults are trying to bring about the end of the world."

"Is it possible I interact with more Millennial cultists than you?"

"The crazies visit the conservatory. Not the dangerous ones."

"Probably no point in starting to call this conspiracy a Revelation cult. Spend all your time trying to describe what that is. Nobody listening."

"Paul is listening."

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"Really?"

"Enough. He didn't see the signs at the factory."

"Paul is listening? Entertaining the notion of a Revelation cult?"

"I didn't call it that."

"You have common elements at various sites but don't know how to put them together. How exactly is he helping?"

"We're just picking up pieces. Sorting through the aftermath. We have to get ahead of this. Know what they are going to do."

Beth pulled away from him. Turned among the covers. Faced the far wall.

"I see."

"I don't know what else to do."

He tried to touch her shoulder.

"This isn't your burden alone to bear. They ask so much."

"They're not asking."

"No, they don't have to," she said, wiping at her face. "They don't even have to ask."

"I will always come back to you." He tried to hold her. "Always."

"Don't smell like them. I don't want to smell them on you."

"I don't think it works like that."

"Doesn't it?"

"I don't know."

"I hate them."

"It's not their fault."

"Paul and Douglas and all the rest. I hate them. For what they make you do. I wish the Revelation cult well. Overthrow the stagnated order. I hope that's what they do."

"Don't wish such things."

"But, I do. I do."

"I will always come back."

"You should never have to leave."

"Even if the company did everything I asked, I would still have to venture out once in a while."

"Noble fool."

"At least we are agreed on something. The nobility of fools."



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The apartment was in a nice part of town. Elegant neighborhood. Quiet. Trees lined the street. Tall. Green and autumn colors. Sunlight and shade played among the branches. The barest traces of a breeze caressed and teased the leaves. Doorman smiled, holding the door open for him. Nodded his head. The elevator was silent. Only sense of movement was watching the numbers glow. Andrew was alone.

Hallway was softly lit. Impressionist and transcendentalist paintings carefully spaced. Faintest scent of pear trees and old leather. Doorbell was silent. A young woman opened the door. Shy smile. Downcast eyes. Simple dress reminded him of billowing robes. Colors like a freshly washed white peach.

She led him to a suite of rooms so much like a small apartment onto itself. Sitting room. Kitchen. Bedroom. Bathroom. All of its own.

"Refresh yourself," she said. "Cleanse yourself."

He let the shower run hot, feeling the water surround him. Steam and mist embrace him. Scrubbed his hair. Washed himself with scented soap he could not describe. Beth would know. He closed his eyes. Not wanting to move. Not trusting himself not to stumble and fall. The water never turned cold.

His clothes were gone from the bedroom. Finding cotton pajamas. Color of new cream. Robe. Dressing gown. Waiting for him on the bed. Slippers. Fuzzy socks. Waiting for him on the floor.

The young woman was watching him as he finished dressing. Led him to a grand room with billowing drapes and windows looking out over the city. Slightly sunken living area with long couches and deep cushions.

Another woman was waiting. His age. Probably older but carrying it so well he would never be able to tell. Short hair. Teasing her neck. Dyed chocolate, red plum and bronze. She wore flowing robes so much like a nightgown and wrap that he could not tell what they were. She smiled with her eyes.

"Welcome, Andrew." Took his hand. Held it. "You may call me Kate. Or, Katherine if familiarity makes you uncomfortable."

"Kate is fine."

"Some prefer Cassandra, which I do not mind," she said, ges-

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turing toward the couch. "A bit melodramatic. Certainly not my name but some people expect these things."

"We do what we must." Andrew sat. She faced him from the next cushion, sitting on her knees. "Kate is fine."

"Custom. Ritual. Ceremony. These things have their place. They are important, but we should not be made slaves to how things have always been done before. Cassandra, indeed."

The young woman was gone.

"The familiar gives comfort," he said. "Given the things we do. The dangers we must face." Kate's eyes were green. She had freckles. "Ceremony. Ritual. Such things give people strength."

"The things we do. The darkness we face. It is old, you know. So old."

"We don't. We try not to talk about it."

"Why?"

Andrew did not answer, finding no words, brushing at the folds in his dressing gown so he would not have to look into her eyes.

"We dance so close to the edge, my sisters and I," she said. "Looking for what tomorrow might bring. Seeking where the old ones may come. We cannot afford to fear the abyss."

"There is a difference between fearing the abyss and looking too long into it. Like studying one's own reflection in a mirror. You lose sight of everything else."

"Sacrifice. Why we are so dependent on the company for such simple things."

"Not. That's not actually what I meant. Madness creeps in around the edges."

"Do you look at me and see a sane woman? You cannot do what I do, my sisters and I. Seeking tomorrow. Without madness."

"Fortune telling. Only a crazy person would believe they can see the future."

"Exactly."

"I cannot afford such luxuries. We must be strong, facing the darkness in the field. Madness, in that context, is a death sentence."

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"Madness is not necessarily weakness. Surrendering one's will to eternity is not necessarily defeat."

"As I said, I cannot afford. Weakness in the face of insanity."

"Nervous?"

"Have you ever seen something walk out of an empty room? Your mind casting shadows because you simply cannot comprehend how an empty space could suddenly be filled. It defies all logic. Contradicts the senses. Simply impossible."

"Expectations?" Kate raised a hand as if beckoning for someone to join them. "Heard stories about us? Mad women? Wild women?"

"You have to be able to stand before something unnatural and unholy without flinching or else it will destroy you."

Another woman entered the room. Maybe as young as the first. Voluptuous. Beautiful. Long hair tied back. Skin the color of coffee stirred with plenty of cream. Robes flowing around her. Teasing hints of bare leg at each step. Naked thigh. Peach-fuzz hair. Nothing underneath.

"You need to relax," Kate said, reaching down, putting her hand in his lap, touching. Andrew gripped the couch. Arms spread wide. Frozen. As if he could not move. "And, you need to," she said. "Relax." Slowly stroking. "You're no good to us if you cannot."

Frozen. As if he could not breath. The other woman standing before him. Kneeling as if to pray. Robes slipping. Beautiful skin. Naked beneath. She touched his legs. Spreading. Hands sliding smoothly, gently, up his thighs.

"The divination is not a simple thing. Not witnessed. Participatory." Fingers teased the knot at his waist. Felt the cotton slip away. "Too many stories. Too many expectations. We have to get past the assumptions." Lips touched him. "You have to relax."

Kate sat beside him, stroking his shoulder. His neck. Messaging the back of his head. The other woman on her knees before him. Her face in his lap. His legs apart. The only sound was Andrew's shallow breathing and the touch of a woman's lips. The world tingled. He felt it race against him. Through him. Racing for his face. The tips of his hair. Leaning back. Not wanting to. Feeling Kate's fingers in his hair. The other's lips elsewhere. He

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couldn't move. Barely breathe. Burning inside-out. He saw nothing. Saw Beth curling within herself. Pulling covers.

Cold. So cold.

"There. That wasn't so bad," Kate said. "The worst is behind you now. Out of the way. Expectations met. You can even tell your wife we forced ourselves upon you."

He felt a warm washcloth. Scented. Couldn't imagine where they had been hiding it. Cool air chasing warm in the wake of the washcloth's touch. Skin drying quickly.

"Have you ever thought much about temple prostitution?" Kate said. "You've heard of it, sure. But, I bet you've never given it much thought."

The washcloth was gone. Delicate hands pulled his pajamas back around. Tied the knot.

"Temple prostitution," she said. "Sacred. Sounds wonderful. Sounds empowering."

The other woman stood without a word. Fingertips slipping quickly away. Wisps of a shy smile playing at the corner of her lips.

"I've given it a lot of thought." Kate said, watching the other woman turn. Robes flowing. "For all I know, I'm in the minority with my theories. Simple reason for it, really. Sacred prostitution. Cuts down on rape, I figure. And, men are far more likely to donate goods, resources, food, money. If they get something out of it." Kate and Andrew were alone. "Priestesses have got to eat, I figure."

"I don't," Andrew said.

"Then, there's monasteries. Monks and priests so holy they can run brothels right there out in the open. So pious that the sin doesn't balance things the other way. Can you believe it?"

Andrew crossed his arms, trying to hug himself. Feeling cold.

"Makes me sick," Kate said. "No wonder they had so many orphanages."

"Not all."

"Oh, sure, occasionally there would be stabs at reform. Typically whenever the local despot needed to fill his coffers. Confiscate from the suddenly corrupt church. Tipped too far the other way."

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"Power corrupts."

"Power? Do you know what it's like? The way they look at us? They don't understand. What we do. You have to let go. Open yourself to the divine. No holding back. It's the only way. Religious ecstasy, they call it. They don't understand. Assuming ecstasies more profane. Spreading stories. Making assumptions."

"Ridicule what they do not understand."

"Ridicule. Shun. I'm trying to prepare you, Andrew. Understand."

"I'm not seeking mere profane ecstasy."

"Expecting it all the same."

"No."

"Perk. Bonus. Benefit."

"Never."

"Say one thing all you like, but I know otherwise," she said, tapping his thigh.

"I didn't ask."

"You needed to be spent, all the same."

"All the same. So you say. Made ready. All the same."

"Little pup-tent. So cute the way you tried to hide."

"I didn't. Not the same. Hardly the same."

"You're not going to say it, are you?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"No. I'm not. I didn't ask."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm not helping, and you didn't ask. Little pup-tent. Mind of its own. It's not your fault what other people say. You didn't desire what you expected."

"That doesn't. Talking circles."

"That we do. We surely do. Talking circles. One cannot touch the impossible. Taste the divine. And, think in straight lines."

"Are you still preparing me?"

"No. Yes, say I am."

"Confusion is part of the service? Preparation for walking so close to the divine?"

"Walking? Never walking." She spread her arms wide. "We dance."

"What do you learn?"

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"Nothing, more often than not." Sheepish smile. "We try."

"I need."

"Yes, I noticed that."

"Let me finish."

"Yes, I am listening."

"Is the company in danger? Conspiracy against us? There's a pattern. They can't all be coincidences. I need to know. Is there another organization arrayed against us? Working to destroy us? I have to know." Hand raised. "Everything I've heard. Yes, everything." Sweeping gesture. "And, yet, I came. Risk walking so close to the divine that I never return. Because I need to know. I have to."

"Finally," Kate said, standing. "A question."

"What?"

"It's almost impossible. Dealing with Paul. He never asks a question. It's always *tell me if you need something* or *let me know if you desire anything*. He won't ask a question. Drives me mad."

"I don't."

"Don't try to understand us, Andrew." Kate lowered a hand, offering to help him stand. "We dance too often and too close to the flame."

She led him from the room. Through a door. Past curtains and beaded hangings.

"For the look of the thing, really," she said, touching a curtain as they passed.

They reached another room past hallways and curtains and doorways. Another room so much like the last that it was almost possible to believe they were the same. Grand room. Window on the city. Sunken couches. Only half as many. Half the room was mostly open floor. Cushions. Padding. Billowing waves. As if bedding had been worked into the fabric of the floor. Candles by the walls. The air was lazy with incense and scented smoke.

There were other women. Different looks. Different ages. Flowing robes. The woman who had touched him was there. The young woman who had met him at the door was not. One held castanets in her hands. Two, maybe. Touching them in time to Kate's step over the floor. Teasing that the beat might change. An-

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other held a fiddle of all things. Reminding Andrew of gypsies and old movies.

Led to the couch. Sat upon the edge. As if he did not want to lean back. Become comfortable. Be surrounded. Kate walked to the edge of the cushioned floor. Raised her hands. Ran them over her robes. Held them across her chest.

"A question," she said. The women sighed. Castanets danced. Scented smoke drifted like mist. Kate took a slow, deep breath, filling her lungs. Turning. "No simple question." Looking this way and that. The others muttering. Whispering. Eager. As if speaking secrets to each other. "No easy answer."

Woman touched the bow to strings so quickly the fiddle almost didn't make a sound. Another's hand caressed Andrew's face. Hair. Gone. Andrew all but jumped from the couch. The woman dancing away. Whispers filling the air like laughter.

"Will the company falter? Will the company fall?" Kate hugged herself. As if cold. As if frightened. "This question plays much upon our minds. Asked ourselves many times." Accepted a cup. "Never happy with the answer." She drank it down, making a show of it. Tipping her head back. The cup held high. As if the drink would wash her face. Castanets laughing. Fiercely angry. Kate standing still. Cup before her. Held with both hands. "Open to interpretation." She traded the cup for another. Walked toward Andrew. The fiddle marking each footfall like a miniature explosion.

"Focus," she said. "Common elements in the field. Coincidence or design." Held the cup out to Andrew. "Never considered before. Not like this. Not today."

Andrew couldn't place the incense. Scents in the air were smoke and sandalwood. Rosemary and thyme. His eyes burned. Cheyenne pepper. Whispers floated at the edge of hearing. Muttering secrets. Repeating Kate's words over and over again like an incoherent game of repeat after me. Castanets and fiddle strings. Never music. Muttering. Screeching. Smoke drifting. People moving.

"This is a participatory experience," Kate said, brushing the cup against his lips.

Cranberries. Rosemary. Salt and bitter chocolate. Black pepper.

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His fingers trembled so much he couldn't touch the cup. Women moved around him. Hissing. Whispering. Muttering secrets too softly to be heard. Kate tipped the cup. Burned his lips. Smothered his tongue. All but choking. Bitter fire. Desperate, Andrew drank. Took it all. All at once. The cup upturned. Tipped back. Coughing. Gagging. Wiping at his face. Trying to breathe. Smoke scrapped his throat. Burning his lungs.

Kate tossed the cup underhanded. Backward. Away from her. Without looking. Whispers laughing. Smoke swirling. She stepped away, standing before him. Watching him. Andrew rubbing his lips with the back of his arm. Lips that still burned with violent spice.

Kate watched him, and women began to chant. Little more than muttering. Less intelligible than whispering. Kate began to move. To sway before him. Shivering. Slowly shaking. Teeth chattering. Eyes closed. Face to the sky. She moved like a dancer. Building slowly. Body moving. Turning slowly. Others brushing past her. Swirling around her like the scented smoke.

Kate muttering, whispering. The others chanting. Chattering like happy children on the distant breeze. She began to move like a marionette with tangled strings. Attempting to dance. Others moved. Others danced. Hands reaching. Touching. Grabbing her arms. Pulling. Shoving. Slipping over loose clothing.

Katherine moaned. Andrew couldn't breathe. Arms moving. Swirling. Glistening and sliding. She turned, trying to spin like a top. Stopped. Suddenly. As if slammed into a wall. Turned the other way. As if held. As if the others were shaking her. Pulling her every which way. Shaking. Shivering. Arms and hands. Fingers pulling at him. Andrew was on his feet. Surrounded. Kate falling back. As if fighting against the others. Muttering. Moaning. Not words. Never words. Stuttering. Tripping over incoherent fragments.

Hands sliding over him. Bodies slipping everywhere. Like the wind. Like the river. Like the tide in a storm. Undertow pulling at him. Eager to drown. The scented air and smoke. Drifting. Swirling. Like a thing alive. Turning dark charcoal and black mud. He was trembling. Falling. Others holding him up with hands. Arms. Bodies.

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The floor collapsing. Crumbling. Standing on fragments. Dancing over eternity. Trying not to fall. Chattering voices. Non-sense surrounding him. Kate before him. Robes flowing. Constricting. Strangling. Consuming. Alive. The others moving. Overlapping. Swirling and dancing. Slipping one into another. Splintering. Merging. Like mist. Like clouds.

Voices screaming. Babbling. Non-sense. Fragments of words. Incoherent syllables. Stuttering. Muttering of castanets. Screeching of fiddle strings. Like fingernails on glass. Smoke eating the very air like acid. Leaving nothing. Splintering. Shattering. Only light the billowing Kate. Vibrating like a mirror about to break.

Andrew reaching. The room a swirling stew. The world a storm. Robes and skin. Brittle. Dry. Sloughing off. Fire. Cold beneath. Pulled away. Ripped away. Cold. So cold. The world screaming. Voices tearing. Figures twisting. Writhing. Slipping. Merging. Light and shadow. Burning and cold. Drifting. Teasing.

The world tearing. The world falling. Light and shadow. Smoke and flame. Writhing. Blankness. Blackness. Light. Warmth. Joy. Bliss.



Andrew woke in darkness. Curled among the covers of a bed. Kate's guest room. Where he had bathed. Clothes abandoned. Lost.

He tried to remember. The scrying. In the light. Among the voices. Songs and singing. In the warmth beyond. After the room had crumbled. The floor having shattered and fallen away. He tried. Remember. Like a dream. Like trying to hold warm mist. Secrets of the temple. Mysteries of a forgotten age. Words so old that none remembered. Abandoned on the mists of time.

He tried to remember. Wanting to scream. Struggling to cry. Pulling at the covers as if he could suck them into his heart. Remember. Make sense of the voices. What they had said. Truth. If only he could remember. If only he could understand the words.

He tried to remember, rubbing at warm, damp eyes. Unable to recall even how he had found the room. Unsure if he was even in the guest room. Feeling he could have fallen through to any-

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where. Knowing he had only fallen so far. Remembering nothing. Jumbled blur. Horrible mishmash. As if a kaleidoscope had vomited all over his mind.

He remembered patterns chalked on a farmhouse floor. He saw circles and circles of circles burned into the walls and floor of an abandoned factory. Symbols and patterns in an old freight elevator behind a museum. Chalk and dust. Traces and fragments. Apartment building. Farmhouse. Factory. They must fit. He wanted them to fit. Form a great pattern.

He saw it in the dark like the afterimage of a sharp light burned into his eyes. Covered his face. Closed his eyes. Tried not to scream. Whispers scraping from between his teeth. Wanting to be free. He held his eyes closed. Holding the covers tight. The dark and silent night all around him. Remembering nothing as his thoughts drifted and faded back into the surviving dregs of the night.



Andrew woke with the morning light drifting in through the window. He had forgotten that Katherine's guest room included windows. He was in the guest room. No memory of how he had arrived in the bed. He ached. Whole body sore as if he had run a marathon. Weak as a newborn kitten. Trembling as it surveyed the room. Looking as if it might collapse at any moment.

Andrew made his way to the shower. Let the water flow. Hot as he could stand it. Let it drench him. Smother him. All but consume him. Eyes closed. Hand touching the wall. He did not move. The water rushing, swirling, but he would never drown.

Returning to the bedroom, he found his clothes laid-out and waiting for him. The robes and pajamas forgotten. He couldn't even remember if he had woken in them. Took him no time at all to dress. When he stood, looking up from his shoes, he found the young woman from the day before watching him. The one who had first opened the door. The smile played at the corners of her mouth. There and gone. As if he had imagined it.

She turned, leaving without a word. He followed, finding him-

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self at the door. She held it open, watching. He crossed into the hall with its paintings and soft light.

"Thank you," she said as he passed. Stopping him, one hand all but touching the door-frame. Looking back to her. "For not expecting favors."

"No, I'm sorry." All but whispering. Voice for gravel. "I fear I did."

"Not like that. I suppose you did have expectations. Too many stories to ignore. Like pink elephants. You can't ignore. But, you didn't assume. If that's a better way of putting it. Didn't demand. Yes, that's even better."

"I didn't. Not why I was here."

"Yes. Some people. They don't say. Not with words. But, with attitude. With behavior. Just screams, service me. Like we're mechanics and they're a car."

"Some people," he whispered. "Some people have bad spots even when the rest is good. Like apples slowly rotting in the bin. I'm sorry you have to put up with them."

"It's not all bad, I suppose," she said, scratching the back of her head. "You will be first among the company so at least there is that."

"That's very sweet of you to say."

"No, not just saying." Her hand touching his shoulder. Fluttering away. "You will be first among the company." Eyes locking with his. Holding still as stone. "Don't you remember?"

"I don't. Understand."

"You will be first."

"How?" Andrew couldn't breathe. The girl was like a demon out of time. "The company won't allow it."

"Yes, I suppose your rule will be tumultuous." Scratching at her hair, again. "You'll make lots of changes. People won't like that. Never like change."

"Then, how?"

"Douglas will fall. He is weak already. People will. Tolerate. Yes, I suppose that's the word. They will tolerate you."

"Well, as long as they don't kill me."

"Yes, about that."

"No."

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door. Felt it tremble. Like a distant earthquake. He watched his hand, standing in the hall. At the very edge. Touching the door. Feeling it drift slowly open. Slip from beneath his fingertips. Eyes only for his hand. Watching it as if it was a distant thing. Watching the gossamer fluttering of his fingers as if he was studying an alien thing.

Andrew took a slow breath, letting it sink through his skin. Feeling it deep in his hips and his bones. He crossed into the apartment. Hand brushing against the door. Letting his fingers slip over it. Feeling the wood beneath his touch. He stood just past the door. Fingers lingering. Pushed it closed behind him.

He stood, listening, as if he could not move. Hearing nothing. No voices. No whispers. No footfalls like the distant patter of a drum quickly growing stronger. There was only silence and the distant scent of morning light.

At last, he moved, slipping off his jacket. Leaving it crumbled and folded on the small table by the door. Slipping off his shoes. Leaving them by the floor. Finding slippers. Pulling them on. Listening to the silence.

He went in search of the living room, finding it empty. Went in search of the dinning room. Kitchen and breakfast nook. Beth was at the table. Breakfast dishes spread out before her. Cup of coffee. Glass of half-finished orange juice. Toast with one bite taken out of the corner. Reading the newspaper. Holding it up like a shield.

Andrew pulled a chair out slowly. Sat. Watching Beth. Listening to the rustling of the newspaper. Remembered that he had not eaten since early the previous morning. Memory of food equaling desire for food. Reached across the table, breaking a piece off the slice of toast. Put it in his mouth. Tried to taste it.

"Did you find the answer you were looking for," Beth asked from behind the newspaper.

Tried to swallow.

"No," he finally said.

"That's too bad."

His eyes burned. As if the incense and thickly scented smoke still drifted all around him. He brushed the back of his hand across his face, rubbing at his brow.

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"You'll never believe what they did tell me," he said. Fingers across his eyes. Nothing but the rustling of newsprint as she turned a page. "They said that I will be first among the company."

The newspaper folded in upon itself unable to support its own weight. Beth watched him with unfathomable eyes.

"What?"

"They said I will be first."

"And, you believe them?"

"They are the ladies. Why would they lie?"

"I don't know. They're not known for speaking plainly."

"Meaning I misunderstood? No, they were very matter-of-fact about it. Douglas will fall, and I will be first."

"Douglas will fall?"

"And, I will be first."

She crumbled the paper, leaning forward.

"How reliable are they? I've heard stories. We've all heard stories."

"They've never won the lottery, if that's what you mean. They can't always express themselves clearly. I understand that better than I ever did before. They can't always point the way, but this was clear. Unambiguous. Definite."

"You will be first."

"I will be first."

They watched each other across the breakfast table.

"That's wonderful," Beth said. "Unbelievable. Do you know what this means?"

"Turmoil and uncertainty. For a long time to come."

"It means, my God. It means you won't have to go into the field."

"What?"

"You'll be safe." Beth slid back in her chair. Newspaper pages slipping to the floor.

"I don't think. I don't think that's the crux of the matter."

"It's the only part I care about."

"It won't be an easy transition. They told me that. You should care about that."

"It can't be worse than the way things are now."

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"Oh, I hold no illusions. Neither should you. But, if I am first. When I am first, I will be able to do so much."

"The changes you are always fighting for. To keep people safe."

"To protect the company. To serve everyone. Save them."

"That's wonderful, Andrew."

"It's hard to believe."

"I might be able to forgive them everything if only this is true. If only this one time. This one little prediction. I could learn to love them."

"They've gotten a bad rap."

"Unearned, I'm sure."

"Not their fault at all. Victims of circumstance. People are always taking advantage. They're vulnerable. Men are bastards."

"Oh, they're just evil." Beth ran a hand over her face as if trying not to laugh. "You'll put a stop to that, I'm sure. Tell Paul to treat them better."

"He does the best he can."

"I'm sure he does. Given the circumstances. Which are about to change. Once you are first."

"Once I am first." He smiled, feeling warm. Reaching for Beth's hand. Taking it. Holding hands above the mismatched breakfast dishes as if making a pact.

"I can hardly wait." Patting their clasped hands. Fingers lingering as they slipped the hold. Touching the table. "Did they give you any details?"

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"Just the basics. I will be first. Douglas will fall."

"The transition. You said something about the transition."

"It won't be easy. They left me with that impression."

"No time-line. Not much to go on. Not very considerate of them, if you think about it."

"We'll just have to be content with what they could tell us. It's enough to inspire hope, certainly."

"Well, what are the ways to become first? I should know this. I work for the conservatory." Counting on her fingers. "Retirement. Death. Well, really the same thing. Incapacitation. Almost the same thing. Incompetence. Not so common. Requires a vote

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of no-confidence from the senior council. Basically the same process as choosing a successor, really."

"You've thought about this."

"No, not really. There are only so many things to do in the conservatory. Answer the same questions only so many times."

"I didn't know you disliked the conservatory."

"Oh, it's all right. For a good cause even if we cannot really explain the cause to outsiders. Sort-of the public face of the company. That carries a lot of weight."

"I hadn't thought about the transition. It's been a lot to take in. I don't think I could describe the last twenty-four hours if I tried."

"We won't dwell on that."

"I think you're right. About the methods of transition." He rubbed at his face, feeling cold. Feeling icicles race against his skin. "I'll have to swing a vote of no-confidence. It won't be easy. Douglas is popular."

"And, they're not overly found of you as is. Making waves. Maybe you can build on that."

"How?"

"I don't know. You can't be the only malcontent. It's just a question of finding them. Identifying the prisoners and the warders."

"Bit extreme."

"It's an expression. You know what I mean."

"I do. Change my tactics. Start with Paul. Get a better sense of the land. How much is Douglas really liked? Who else might support a change in leadership? Don't focus on the changes themselves. New blood. New leadership. That kind of thing."

"It's a start." Beth grasped his hands over the table. "And, I." Gripped his hands tight. "I'll try to find out what I can. My ladies gossip. Find out what the menfolk really think of Douglas."

"A start. Definitely a start. And, God forbid, if things continue as they are. The conspiracy continuing to make things worse. People may come around."

"They might at that. Nothing like discord to make people wish for change. But, let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"Let's hope for that."

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"Conspiracy to fail." Beth held up the coffee cup.

"Conspiracy to fail." Andrew raised the juice glass.

Clinked them together.

"Amen," Andrew said.



"So, tell me everything that happened."

"There's not much to tell."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"It's not simply a question of discretion?"

"That sounds like a complete misunderstanding of who and what they are."

"Well, it's comforting to know that you did speak with them."

"Sounds almost as if you are saying they aren't trustworthy. That they don't rely on us. They aren't exploited."

"And, they definitely spoke to you."

"Yes, they spoke to me. Didn't you know? Oh, that's right. You don't ask them questions."

"There's a reason I don't ask them questions."

"I'm sure there is."

"You have to remember how much I interact with them. You've been exposed to one of their ceremonies, yes?"

"Yes."

"They are infectious."

"I suppose."

"I am responsible for them. Need to maintain a certain distance. Professional detachment. In order to protect them. Minimize the exploitation. Could I do that. If I was as wild as they are?"

"What they do. The sacrifices they make. Indescribable."

"Yes."

"I don't even. Remember."

"It's much to take in."

"Overwhelming."

"I tried to warn you."

"That you did."

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"Not very well, I'll admit. They are hard to describe without drifting purely into gossip and rumor."

"Expectations only get in the way."

"Oh, yes?"

"For the best you didn't try to prepare me more. Warn me more."

"Well, did they help you? Find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"Wish I could say I'm surprised. It's not as simple as asking a question and getting an answer. People don't seem to get that. Question. Answer. More of a tapestry. Glimpsed. Being shaken even as you squint at it."

"Thought you said you never asked them questions."

"No, you said I never asked them questions. What they told you, I'm sure. Try never asking a question. It can't be done."

"They say things. Why do they say things?"

"I don't know."

"Are they really all named Kate?"

"Who told you that?"

"Kate."

"It's more of a nickname, I suppose. Sign of solidarity."

"Bonding. Shared experience."

"Guess this means you're going to keep prattling on about conspiracies."

"Until people listen."

"What if there is no conspiracy, Andrew? What then?"

"If there is evidence. If I'm proven wrong, I will go quietly."

"How do you disprove a conspiracy? Armageddon cult. Secret society. They are out there, you know. How do you prove they're not out to get us even when they dance around thinking about the end of the world?"

"Sounds like you're almost won over."

"It's crazy talk, Andrew. Paranoid delusions. Think about what we do."

"I am very much aware. The things we do are dangerous. We risk our mental stability. Unreasoned paranoia is an expression of instability."

"That's one way of putting it, yes."

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"We take risks. The ladies Katherine take risks. Dancing on the edge."

"The ladies Katherine dance on the edge so that they may help us. Don't lose sight. Remember why I don't. Try not to ask them questions."

"Professional detachment. Stability."

"Remember how I reacted to that thing. It still makes me uneasy. Remembering."

"You did very well."

"You helped me. Your detachment. Stability. In the face of that thing."

"You will do better next time."

"There's that confidence and iron will, again."

"Perhaps."

"Don't lose that. Don't be consumed by these dreams of conspiracy."

"I think I can resist the siren call of the ladies. I've learned all I can from them, I think."

"Good."



The sitting room was as quiet as a library. Leather chairs. Soft lighting. Slender tables with recessed ashtrays. Bookcases. Group portraits of serious men in dark suits. Framed pages from ancient books. More than half the chairs were empty. Waiters stood like shadows in the corners and against the walls, appearing at the wave of a hand. Listening to hushed requests. Delivering drinks and taking empty glasses.

One man sat at the edge of his chair. Fair-haired. Well trimmed beard. Thin hands. Cigarette, mostly ash, ignored between his fingers. Table pulled around before him. Papers spread like a complex game of solitaire. Losing all the same.

"You know you've been staring at them too long when the reports start talking to you," Andrew said.

"I don't worry until they start talking sense." Henry waved a hand absently toward the next chair. Fingers fluttering. Ash fly-

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ing. "That was good work at the factory. Looked directly into a breach, I hear."

"That kid, Jason, looked into the breach." Andrew sat, leaning back in the plush chair as if he had been on his feet for hours. "I fared better. Only looked upon a freshly closed breach." Waved fingers as if brushing away a fly. Ordered spiced lemonade without once looking toward the waiter. "Stories spread like a game of badly mumbled telephone," he said.

"Even the reports can feel like that at times."

"At times?"

"More than all the time then. It's all rumors and lies, isn't it? Get so used to sorting through them we don't even notice anymore."

"More art than skill. Unless that's a mixed metaphor. Contradiction. The kid recovered well. We'll make a hammer of God out of him yet."

"Hard to come by. Jacob will be missed."

"Yes, he will."

"Not one for the city, Jacob. Liked the field. Distant places. Getting by on the skin of his teeth."

"Didn't know him well at all." Lemonade delivered. Cold to the touch.

"Well, you spend so much of your own time in the field. When would your paths cross?"

"Mismatched faces. Displaced friendships." Andrew raised his glass as if making a toast. Took a sip. "Never know the cost of our calling."

"Burden. Toll. Without even once facing an abomination. Breach in the fabric of the universe. Looking upon a real-life Escher painting. No wonder there are so few of us."

"Noble fools."

"We need more like Jacob. Like you."

"Think it will happen?" Andrew pointed with his glass, hiding behind it.

Henry looked over the papers spread before him as if realizing that it was not a game of solitaire after all. Shoulders sank. Sigh escaped him.

"I don't know," he said.

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"You should know," Andrew said. "Should be certain. Doubt is not our friend."

"That it is not. We look for people to send into the field. Sacrificial offerings. More than just gathering rumors and stories. Hunt them down in the dark. The muttering men. Mumbling. The source of stories. So few. Nobody wants to face them."

"It is our calling."

"So easy to forget. Easy to hide. Must gather. Reports must flow. Cannot risk facing the mumbling men."

Andrew said nothing. Sipped his drink. Watched Henry over the slender glass.

"Cowards," Henry said. Hollow voice almost a whisper. Eyes for the pages spread before him. Looked to Andrew. "No shock to hear me say such things. Your words more than mine."

"Good to hear them from another's lips," Andrew said. "Don't feel so alone."

"Still a minority. Research and study more important than doing."

"What can we do?"

"If I knew that." Henry leaned back in his chair. "I would be doing it"

"Maybe, you just don't want to do it."

"Oh?"

"Not what I meant. Not a coward. The things we know we must do are too big. We don't want to imagine them much less do them."

"Really?"

"All of this." Andrew pointed with his glass toward the papers. "Easy by comparison. We don't fear the abyss. We shy from the familiar. Tradition. As much as we say we must do this or that, we won't challenge convention."

"Andrew, all of us are here because we won't stand idly by. Heads in the sand. Sheep."

"We cling to that too tightly, I think. That we are not sheep. Oblivious to the world around us. Easy to ignore. Easier to forget. Laugh at the notion of monsters in the dark, and yet they are obsessed with alien abduction, ghost hunting and Bigfoot."

"You're mixing metaphors, again."

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"Herding cows has nothing to do with it."

"Conflating ideas, at least."

"No, we're hypocrites. Cowards, you said yourself. Sneering at the cows hiding behind their psychics and ghost hunters. And, yet, what do we do? Research. Hiding behind books."

"So, we should burn them?"

"Again, you refuse to see the big picture. Hiding behind an absurd idea. Burn books, indeed. We must burn away the notion that books are king. The only thing that matters. The field matters. Books matter. They are our shield not our prison."

"You're hiding behind a clever phrase."

"Cronyism is the problem," Andrew said all but whispering. "Douglas is the problem."

"Ah."

"You see it."

"The big idea."

"We're so far gone even you call us cowards. Douglas cannot be turned. You know I've tried."

"I know."

"Surrounded by sycophants. Hiding behind them. He doesn't want things to change."

"Inertia. Apathy."

"Fear."

"Yes, fear." Henry looked to the pages spread before him as if he would crumble them in his fist or sweep them to the floor.

"What you're suggesting is not simple."

"That's why I'm talking to you."

"Really?"

"I need to know," Andrew said. "What we're up against. Inertia. Apathy. How many might secretly see things our way?"

"Our way?"

"Yes, our way."

"When exactly did this become our way?"

"The second you called us cowards."

"There is a difference between knowing that something must be done and believing that you have the only answer."

"At least, we are agreed that something must be done."

"True."

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"Don't let that fact alone freeze you into complacency."

"I don't think that word means what you think it means."

"I think it does."

"Not exactly winning friends here."

"I don't care about friends. I want allies."

"Be careful, there. They are not mutually exclusive."

"I will take what I can get. We must face the abyss. It's what we say we do."

"Yes, it is."

"If we can remind people. If I can remind them of what we once were."

"Grudging respect."

"Best I can hope for? I will take it."



"What is this?" Andrew took the card, looking at the folded page.

"Note from the ladies Katherine," Paul said.

"What's it say?"

"Don't know. It's for you."

"You don't know?" He held the paper tight between his fingers. "They are your responsibility."

"Doesn't make me their mother."

"Wait," Henry said. "The ladies are sending you messages?"

"First one," Andrew said.

"What have you been doing?"

"Seeking answers." Andrew flipped the letter open. "Don't go to Hatfield."

"That's rather cryptic."

He handed the note back to Paul.

"Don't go to Hatfield," Paul said, reading.

"Are their messages always so obscure?"

"They're not always this short." Paul folded the paper closed.

"Can't say I've had to deal with them before. Not directly. Not that I can recall. Short and to the point so you don't miss it. Implying urgency."

"Help if there was only one Hatfield I could name," Andrew

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said. "Nothing memorable in my reports. Anything?" He waved vaguely at the papers spread on the table.

"Assuming Hatfield is a location. Not a person," Henry said. "Wait, there is." He brushed a hand through the papers. Lifted one page. "Confluence of rumors. City of Hatfield. Investigation in progress. Intercept team en route."

"They need backup."

"Agreed."

"Let's not be hasty," Paul said. "Stay away from Hatfield."

"Too late to call them off even if we wanted to." Andrew reading over Henry's shoulder. "We face danger."

"You, then. Go nowhere near Hatfield."

"Me?"

"It's the only interpretation you will accept."

"I'm inclined to agree with Paul on this one," Henry said.

"I'm no coward."

"You'll defy the ladies Kate altogether," Paul asked. "You're trying to get them to help you with your conspiracy theories."

"There's a conspiracy, now?" Henry said.

"It's always a possibility." Andrew sank back in his chair. "They'll help me either prove or deny. If it's true, we're forewarned. If it's false, I can stop worrying."

"Spoken like a sane person. Backup, they will have. Paul and myself, perhaps. I don't get into the field nearly often enough any more."

"As long as someone goes."

"We can field this," Paul said. "Honor the spirit of the note."

"If we're interpreting it right."

"I seem to recall someone very recently reminding me about doubt," Henry said.

"Did I?"

"Words to that affect anyway. Doubt in the field will get you killed."

"This isn't the field."

"Close enough."



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Once a house. Once a school. Once a library. Conservatory. The building could have been as old as the city to look at it. On a quiet street that had once been the center of activity. Tree-lined neighborhood. The stray family or two walking past. Beth entered the conservatory by a side door. Employee entrance. Using her own key.

Security guard smiled. Sitting at his desk.

"Morning Mrs. Carver."

"Morning Sticks," Beth said. Keys returned to her purse. "How's Gretchen?"

"Oh, she's fine, thanks for asking."

"That's good. Quiet morning?"

"Best kind. Loonies at a minimum. That Jericho group that threatened to come back hasn't returned."

"That's very good. Can always count on them to be unreliable."

"Around just enough to keep things from getting too boring," he called after her as she walked down the hall.

She left her purse and coat in the back office. Stopped in the kitchen for a sip of water. Pour a cup of coffee. Emily Keaton sitting at the small table. Cup held between her fingers as if it was keeping her warm.

"Morning Emma," she said.

"Morning Beth. Coffee's fresh. From that new place. Shade grown."

"It's all shade grown these days. Organic. Side of an active volcano, too, right?"

"Probably. Think it was picked by happy orphans?"

"That would be bold type on the label." Beth took a sip. "How are things out front?"

"We've got two. Three people in already. College kids to look at them."

"So early?"

"Didn't burst into flames or anything. Giving college kids a bad name."

"Not if they've been up all night."

"True."

"Ask for any red-flags?"

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"Nope, all innocent last I checked."

"Well, that's good. Usually the die-hards who want to examine red-flags, anyway. Becky out front?"

"Manning the frontier alone."

"I'd better go spell here then. Whoops, can't take this." Took a quick swig of her coffee. Left the cup on the counter. "What sort-of example would that be to set?"

Beth left the kitchen. Climbed the stairs. Paused at the door. Ran a hand through her hair. Pulled at the corners of her blouse. She turned the handle. Crossed into reception. Stopped at the long counter. Looking out at the front entrance. Polished. Old wood doors. Small windows. Discrete security desk. Long hall with paintings and engravings on the walls. Tables. Stiff-backed chairs. One young man at a table by the far wall under the window. Several books at his side. One open. Writing in his notebook. Rebecca at the counter. Papers spread before her. Pen in hand. Reading.

"Morning Becky," Beth said, crossing behind her. Looking out across the hall.

"Elizabeth."

Beth paused mid-step. All but imperceptibly. Not even one breath. Continued. Found her chair at the counter. Books left from the day before. Marked and tagged. Closed notebooks. Pens and loose paper. She turned back to the room.

"Emma thought there might be as many as three already pounding the books."

"Two."

"I see one." Sat.

"In the dust room."

"Back soon, I'm sure." She put on her reading glasses. Lifted the first loose page from the top of her notes. Began to go over it. Pen in hand.

The other student returned. Young woman. Carrying folios the size of cookie-sheets. Chose a table far from the young man. Spread a folio out before her. Old paper rustling. Silence. Touch of Beth's pen on paper.

"It's not right, Elizabeth."

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"I'm sorry?" Beth looked over her glasses. Rebecca was staring at her.

"It's not right. Staying behind."

"Andrew is in the field more than anybody." She glanced over the room. The two students ignoring them. Lowered her voice to a stage-whisper. "Not even his decision. It's eating him up inside."

"As well it should. Downright cowardly."

"Nothing of the kind. Won't let him go. For once, they won't let him go."

"Now that there's danger."

"There's always danger. You don't like that Henry is finally facing it."

"Andrew's fault. Spreading rumors. Sowing dissent."

"He's waking people up. Shaking them from complacency. They're finally accepting their responsibilities."

"He's causing trouble for no good reason. Dissidents. Dissent. Because he's a coward. Doesn't want to face his duty any more."

"Duty? His duty? What's his duty, Becky? To face the dark night alone? Abominations? When did it become his duty alone?"

"All do our part. All do our duty. Nothing good will come of it."

"Every day, I know Andrew risks his life. Every day, I wonder if he will return. You're talking non-sense because you've forgotten what it's like. Grown complacent."

"Henry worked hard to secure his position. Your husband has done nothing but cause trouble. Whine and complain. He has the position he deserves."

"My husband has worked harder than anyone."

"Working harder to upset everyone. Undermine Douglas. Your husband is spreading lies."

"That's false."

"Rumors and lies. Saying Douglas is weak. Worse of late. Spreading vile lies."

"Andrew wants nothing other than for the company to be strong. Shared responsibility is strength. Hardly lies."

"While he hides. Nobody will listen now that he has shown himself for the coward that he is."

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"They wouldn't let him go."

"Tried so hard to change their minds, I'm sure." Rebecca stood. "His duty was to go even if he knew it was his death."

"He has never shied from death."

Rebecca turned. Left without another word.

"Never shied from death," Beth said, removing her glasses. Pressing her wrist into her face. Looking at the pages open before her without really seeing them.



Andrew knocked on the door. Waited. Hammered on it. Loud. The doorman hadn't given him any trouble. Had thought he would need to bluster his way in. But, the doorman had greeted him by name. Had tipped his hat. As if he had been expected. Nobody answered the door. Not when he rang the silent bell. Not when he knocked. Not when he hammered. He waited. Hand pressed against the door as if he might feel anyone standing on the other side. Breathing hard. Heart hammering. He knocked, again, shaking the door in its frame.

At last, the young woman Katherine opened the door. Said nothing. Stood so that he could enter. Turned after closing the door. Began walking without a backward glance. Andrew followed her until he recognized the path to the small suite of rooms. Then, the path to the main room. He abandoned the young Katherine. Walked quickly to the grand sitting room. The recessed couches. The curtains. Large windows overlooking the city.

Andrew turned in a circle. Katherine had not followed as if she had not even noticed that he had abandoned her. Nobody else was around. Andrew paced this way and that. Didn't want to sit. Didn't want to pass through the curtain to the far chambers and rooms. Billowing smoke and incense. Andrew went to the window. Looked over the city. Turned. Paced back through the room. Heart still pounding.

The other woman Kate entered from the far rooms. Slipping past the curtain. Short hair. Freckles. Wearing flowing robes like he remembered. Cream colored. Barefoot. Bare arms. She smiled as if remembering a private joke.

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"Andrew."

"Why did you tell me to stay away from Hatfield?"

Kate stood still. Hands hidden. Smiled.

"Sit," she said.

"Why, Kate?" He started to pace. "Why send me that note? It's obliterated my standing in the company. Made my wife a laughingstock."

"Bit of an exaggeration, I think."

"You didn't hear her." Pacing. "Called me a coward." Turning. "They called me a coward to my wife's face."

"Projection. Externalizing internal fears."

"That doesn't matter. All they'll remember is that I didn't go to Hatfield. Never remember anything I've ever said. Never listen to anything I have to say ever again."

"You should sit, Andrew. Rest. Refresh yourself."

"No." He stood still, trying not to breathe. "I want to know why, Katherine."

"You're too tense. You need to relax. You're no good to us if you cannot relax."

"No."

"Refresh yourself. Cleanse yourself."

"I won't do that." Shaking his head. "I'm not like that."

"Like what?"

"I don't expect. I won't. When you go to one of those places, what's the first thing they want you to do?"

Kate said nothing, watching him.

"They want you to bathe," he said. "So you're not dirty. So you don't smell. It's harder for them to fake enthusiasm if you're filthy."

"I see."

"It's what everybody says. What everybody knows. It's not why I'm here. I don't have expectations. I'm not here to be relaxed."

Kate watched him.

"You should sit," she said. "Calm yourself even just a little if you will not rest. I promise not to touch you. Force myself upon you."

Andrew paced this way and that. Looked to the couch. Moved slowly to it. Rested a hand upon it. Finally, sat.

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"Are you thirsty? Do you need anything?"

"No," he said. "Thank you."

"We did send you a note."

Andrew did not answer.

"It's not puzzle pieces," she said. "It's not a chess game. We don't know how one thing will affect other things. Freaking butterflies. How I hate them." She walked to the couch. Chose a cushion facing him. "You know this," she said, sitting, brushing at her robes with an idle hand. "It's not straightforward visions. Clear messages. Easy answers."

"I know," he said all but whispering. Turned his head to the far walls. Windows. View of the city. "Hang on. That note was clear enough, and the first message had absolutely no ambiguity whatsoever."

"Okay, sometimes it is clear. I'll give you that."

"Then, why? Stop messing with me."

Kate said nothing.

"Said I'll be first then took it all away from me." He couldn't look at her. "Why stay away from Hatfield?"

"It's not a tapestry. Cause and effect are not puzzle pieces, as I said." She raised a hand as if he was about to contradict her. "I know. Some things are clear. Simple things. Your death in Hatfield, for example."

Andrew said nothing.

"You never question the things you face. Where they come from. What they are doing here."

"It draws their attention," he said. She looked at him like a teacher during exams. "It draws your attention to them. Better way to put it." She nodded. "We don't talk about it."

"They are very old. Very forgetful. And very, very angry."

"This is not news."

"They are also without form. It's the transition, you see. You cannot exist without form. You cannot be here without shape. Without being. This concept is so alien to them. Them. There is no them. Another foreign concept. No it. No them. No thought. No identity."

"I don't. Understand."

"It's why they so often look like badly baked pudding. With

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things sticking out." Waved fingers in the air. "Why they so seldom look like us."

"I don't." Shambling. Shuffling. In the dark. Stabbing. Stabbing. "No," he said almost standing.

"If you had gone unprepared. The intercept team." She shook her head as if she were afraid to speak.

"Henry. Paul. You let them go without warning."

"The note."

"You didn't warn them."

"You would have gone if the note had said why."

"They would not have let me."

"You would have convinced them."

"So, you sent them to their deaths instead." Andrew stood. "To protect me."

"It's not a chess game."

"No, it's not. Not a game at all."

"I'm sorry."

"If I go to Hatfield, will I still die?"

Kate said nothing.

"If I go to Hatfield now, Kate. Forewarned. Forearmed. Will I still die?"

She said nothing.

"Heisenberg. The observer effect. Will I still die?"

Silence.



Andrew stopped the car. Looked to the map. Consulted his notes. Faced the fork in the road revealed by the high-beams of his car. Looked back to the map. Folded. Half-crumbled. Spread over the passenger's seat. Checked his notes. Back to the road. Hands on the wheel. Looking. Watching the twilight dark. Everything faded gray-scale. All but black. Hands gripped the wheel. Radio turned so low it was barely white noise. Echo of Beth's voice in his head. Pleading. Crying. Engine grumbling. He looked to his notes. Back to the narrow street. Practically a country road. Forest on one side. Bushes. Tall brush on the other. One branch of the road leading back toward houses and homes. Backyards not that

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far away. The other branch wound deeper into the woods, growing slowly darker and denser. No streetlights. No street-signs.

He put the car back in gear. Drove. Away from the thick brush. Tall bushes. Away from the houses. Homes. Drove into the woods so much like an island forest in the middle of civilization. Narrow road. Twisting. Turning. No lights. No signs. Only what his high-beams revealed. Driving slow. Beth had cried. She had screamed and argued. Thrown books. Broken dishes. Andrew stopped at a pull-off barely wide enough for his car to clear the way. Two cars already there. Empty. One of them was the car that Paul had signed out only the day before.

Andrew watched the cars, gripping the steering-wheel. High-beams flooding the pull-off. Nothing happened. Nobody stirred. He could see the beginnings of the path. Leading into the woods. As if this was the start of a little noticed nature trail. Dark as midnight. Even as the sky still hinted at distant twilight. Andrew slid his fingers over the steering-wheel as if he might still turn back onto the road and drive away. Beth had held him, pulling at his shirt. And, held him. And, held him. He had promised to return.

Andrew got out of the car. Faintest hint of smoke in the air. Took the flashlight from the passenger's seat. Long. Heavy. Four D-cell heavy. Could be used as a club. Could actually hurt somebody. He walked around Paul's car. High-beams revealing everything. Nothing. No sign. Nobody there. Backseat was a mess of hastily thrown about bags and packaging almost as if thought and order had been abandoned. Front-seat had the remnants of a first-aid kit. Ripped gauze and sterile packaging. Random knots of cloth tape. Dark patches like semi-dry blood on sponges and antiseptic wipes and pads.

Andrew leaned against the car. Head down. Looking sideways toward the path into the woods. Beth's voice. Incoherent cries. Heart trembling. Hands shaking. Light from the car in his eyes. Touch of black smoke at the edge of reason. Burning wood not unlike the mingled scent of many household fireplaces. Stung his eyes. Beth's voice. Beth's eyes. The lady Katherine had said nothing. Burned his eyes.

He walked around the first car. Nothing. The first intercept

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team. Completely unprepared. Open backpack on the seat. Random junk-food wrappers. Cans of soda. Nobody. Nothing to see.

He went back to his car. Leaned into the driver's side. Killed the engine. Turned off the headlights. Leaned into the backseat. Took out the brand new motorcycle jacket. Purchased just that day. Put it on. Heavy. Ill-fitting. Held the flashlight like a club. Moved around. Trying to get a feel for the heavy jacket. Back to the car. Raw-hide gloves. Construction worker's belt. Slot for a second flashlight. Steel hammer. Small hatchet. Large glow-sticks. Bent. Snapped half of them. Shook them until they glowed luminescent green. Gun.

Checked the semiautomatic pistol. Seldom used. Frequently cleaned. Safety still on. Bullets. Extra magazines added to the belt pouch. Holster clipped onto the belt. Andrew turned off the internal car lights. Closed and locked the doors. Walked to the beginnings of the forest path. Gun held in one hand. Flashlight in the other. He stood at the foot of the path, looking into the dark. Listening to Beth's tears. Smashed plates. Broken glass. He could definitely smell smoke. Fingers had held him. Somewhere, the forest burned. Trembling arms wrapped around him. Heart beating fit to burst. Dust in his mouth. He dropped the first glow-stick at the foot of the path, marking the location of the cars, and walked into the woods.

It was quiet. Only sounds were his ragged breathing. Hammering of his heart in his ears. Crush of dry brush and leaves underfoot. Only light was the narrow beam of his flashlight and the green glow at his waist. He walked, following the path as best he could. Stopped. Dropped another glow-stick. Listened to the silent night. Tested for the strength and stench of smoke. Continued walking. Leading with the flashlight. Nothing. No sound. No voices. Only the scent of burning wood to guide him.

Walked deeper into the wood. Smoke growing stronger. Wisps and traces made visible by the flashlight beam. Drifting across the path. He stopped, watching the smoke billow and drift before him. Source was deeper in the wood. Fire was off the path. Burning trees were away from his slip of a reminder of civilization. He stood, watching. Listening. No sound. Nothing but his light.

He dropped another glow-stick and stepped off the path.

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Walking slowly away. Slightly uphill. Trees all around him. Surrounding him. He pressed on. Heart still pounding. Topped a rise. Firelight. Faint light. Red and glowing. Off in the distance. More smoke. Thicker. Drifting. He walked toward it. Voices drifting in his head. Beth. Katherine. Paul reading the note.

Andrew stopped. Sound like an animal slipping through the wood. Shuffling. Stumbling. Sound like bees singing choral laments slightly off-key. Andrew did not move, letting the flashlight slowly drift across the forest floor. Smell of black smoke and burning wood was strong. All but covered the faint traces of rotted flesh smearing the air. Andrew held the gun low. Let the flashlight play slowly among the roots of the trees.

Found the foot first. Legs. Light sweeping over it. Slowly back. More stump than foot. Figure shuffling slowly as if it was trying to imitate the trees. Hardly human. Vaguely man-shaped. Reminded Andrew of nothing so much as a charcoal outline smeared over paper. Seemed to notice the flashlight beam not at all. Head bent. Slumped. Not much of a head.

It had attacked Nicholas. Savagely. Grabbed him. Tumbling. Slashing. Clawing. Screaming. Voices screaming. Stabbing. There had been stabbing.

Andrew watched. Listened. Waited. The thing moving as if it was alone in all the wood. Bees moaning. All but singing. Lamenting the inherent injustices of the world. There seemed to be only the one thing in the world. Sound in his head was the rush of his blood. Wild beating of his heart. He couldn't breathe. The creature stumbled between the trees as if it was a marionette with tangled strings.

Andrew chose his stance. Aimed carefully. Held his breath. Flashlight held awkwardly in one hand supporting his gun hand. Sighting down the beam of light. Breathed out. Fired. Dropping the flashlight. Green embers from the remaining glow-sticks showed the creature slowly turn toward him. Fired again. Thing flinched as if punched hard in the shoulder. Fired again. It staggered back a step. Andrew changed targets. Fired again. Creature fell to one knee. Bees were swarming. Laments growing more desperate. Strangely muffled. Ringing in his ears like the afterimage of gunfire.

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Andrew found the flashlight at his feet. Picked it up. Shone the light on the monster. Stepped slowly toward the thing. Watching it. Trying to rise. Trying to stand as if it didn't understand it needed its hands to help it rise. Leg was worthless. Left arm seemed unusable. Smell made him want to wretch. Smoke unable to mask the stench. He stopped. Facing it.

Nicholas had screamed. Creature had growled. Slashing. Stabbing. Clawing. Stabbing.

Andrew fired. In the chest where the heart on a man would be. Again, in the stump of the head. It slumped against the earth. As if tired. Unable to move. Moans and lamentations slipping away. The creature did not move. The wretched awful shape did not move. And, it did not move. Andrew breathed out.

He heard a voice. Faint. Distant. Someone shouting. Hollering. Calling out like an undeclared game of Marco Polo. Andrew said nothing. Listening. Moving slowly toward the voice. Walking more quickly. Henry's voice. Brisk pace. Watching the dark wood. Trying not to run.

"Over here!" Henry must have noticed the flashlight beam bouncing between the trees.

There was Henry. Holding something lengthwise in both hands as if he didn't know what to do with it.

"No idea what you've gotten yourself into," Henry said. "Firing a gun. Only makes them mad. No clue. Andrew?"

"Yes," he said. Close enough to see clearly. Running the light over Henry. Suit-coat was rumpled, dirty and torn. No Tie. Shirt was dirty not bloody. Pants were rumpled and dirty. Henry was holding a long-handled ax. Price-tag still visible on the side.

"What are you doing with a gun?"

"Where's Paul?"

"Lost your senses. Using a gun."

"Paul." Shining the light in Henry's face. "Where is he?"

"Here. By the tree." Henry turned. Andrew flashed the light.

Paul was leaning against a tree, watching them. Arm held tight to his side. Hastily bandaged. No suit-coat. Tie dangling loose. Ripped shirt was bloody. Torn pants. Scratched face. Bruised.

"What's with the noisemaker," Paul asked.

"Faced one before." Handed Paul the flashlight. Watched how

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he held it. Judging strength. Discomfort. "Humaform. Vaguely human anatomy." Took the other flashlight from his belt. "Bullets work."

"That was quite the risk."

"Could test from a distance. Still had this." Shook the flashlight. "And, this." Tapped the butt of the flashlight against the hammer at his waist. "Where the others?"

"Never found them," Henry said.

"Obviously, there's more than one manifestation. I got one. We should use the ax on it just to be sure. You started the fire? How many?"

"Two. So, three down."

"There's something else out there," Paul said, stepping away from the tree. Testing his legs. "It's had time to grow. I can practically feel it."

"They didn't fear us," Henry said. "Why didn't they fear us?"

"I don't know." Paul looked through the dark. "Lost my crucifix out there somewhere. All the good it did us."

"This all we got then?" Shone his flashlight over the gun. Paul's flashlight. Henry's ax. "Flammables?"

"We're out. More at the car."

"Right, we go get them. Have to finish this tonight. Fire's going to bring police. Firemen. We've got to clean up before they get here."

"Take hours to find the car in this light. Don't know how long we've been walking in circles."

"Fortunately, I've been doing the Hansel and Gretel thing." Tapped the flashlight to the glow-sticks still on his belt.

"Should have thought of that when we got the ax."

"We had more pressing concerns like how to get the ax with you bleeding all over everything," Henry said. "I only saw those tiny ones anyway."

"Right, let's start following breadcrumbs."

With the two flashlights they were able to find the malformed, barely human body that Andrew had left on the forest floor. Henry went to work on it with the ax.

"What are you wearing?" Paul said, running his light over Andrew's jacket.

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"Best armor I could find on short notice."

"Really."

"Yes, really. This was hard enough to find. Doesn't help when you don't know what you're looking for."

"Motorcycle gear has come a long way." Henry lowered the ax. Wiped a hand across his forehead.

"Makes you stand out," Paul said.

"Step in the right direction, at least," Andrew said. "We could develop something more subtle if only Douglas would approve."

"Not the time."

"Looks like we're done here, anyway."

Andrew selected one of the unbroken glow-sticks. Snapped it. Shook it until it glowed. Dropped it next to the jigsaw pieces of the body. Left it behind. They walked through the woods. Andrew leading. Away from the smoke and the burnt, flickering light of the fire in the distance. Finally spotted the faint green glow of one of the sticks. Reached the path. Began following it through the woods back toward the cars.

"We told you to stay away," Paul said.

Andrew didn't answer.

"Yet, here you are. Ready for a night hunt. The perfect tools for facing things that shamble around like zombies."

"Why didn't you go for backup?" Andrew said.

"We were the backup, remember?"

"Had the sense to go and come back."

"We couldn't leave it. Like you said. The fire will attract civilians. We just couldn't leave it."

"How many have already fallen to the abominations in there?" Henry said. "Missing dogs. Stray cats. People vanishing without a trace."

"Not so many people obviously," Andrew said.

"Not my point."

"In fact, you're missing the point. Deliberately changing the subject, aren't you?" Paul said. "You're not even a day behind us. You talked to them, didn't you?"

"With permission," Andrew said.

"Not about this. You went back. Not another note. You spoke

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to them. Last night. Today. Doesn't matter. You went back, and they told you what to expect."

"Of course, I went back. You would have done the same."

"It's dangerous. A precarious road you're walking, Andrew."

"I will not shirk my duty. None of us would, obviously."

Paul said nothing.

They reached the cars at last. Breathing hard from the long walk in the dark. Keeping their voices to themselves. Popped the trunk on the middle car. Took more plastic gas cans from within. Andrew checked the first car. Broke a window with the flashlight. Opened the trunk. Paul and Henry watching him. Went back to their work when the car alarm didn't go off. Andrew took a sports-bag out of the trunk. Began going through it. Small plastic bottles filled with flammable liquid. Cartons of table salt. Crucifix. Long daggers, intricately carved. Hammer. Flashlight. First-aid kit. Bottle of cheap whiskey. Peanuts. Chocolate bar. Energy drink.

He carried the sports-bag back to the middle car. Henry was helping Paul slip a sports-bag over his shoulder. Grimaced. Patted the bag with his arm.

"Okay, I'm good."

Andrew went to the trunk of his car. Took a backpack from it. Returned to the middle car. Began transferring the flammable bottles and table salt from the sports-bag into it. Paul and Henry watching him.

"Any reason you weren't already wearing that?" Paul said.

"Didn't know what to expect."

"Really. Mister *I Have a Gun* didn't know what to expect."

"What good does a heavy backpack do me if I can't reach what's inside?"

"Made us trek all the way back out to the cars."

"Yeah. Yeah. Drink." He handed Paul an energy drink. "You, too." Handed another to Henry. "Hope you like dark chocolate," he said, holding it out to Paul.

"Disgusting stuff."

"Pity we don't have any prunes."

Paul almost gagged on his drink.

"In God's name, why?"

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"Iron. How much blood you lost? Have to settle for the chocolate."

"Dark chocolate have a lot of iron in it, does it?"

"I don't know."

Paul threw the empty can in the trunk. Finally took the chocolate from him.

"Oh, for the love of." Held it back toward Andrew. "You have to open it for me. One handed here."

"Use your teeth." Andrew took it. Ripped off the wrapper. Handed it back.

"Yes, I'll have to remember that next time."

"I think we're ready," Henry said.

Paul stopped at the very edge of the path where it disappeared into the wood.

"Still time to heed the note," he said, watching Andrew.

"Duty calls." Andrew started down the path never looking back. Paul and Henry following. They couldn't see his face.

Walked the path as if it was broad daylight. As if the wood was empty save for them. Flashlight beams dancing before them. Smoke. Sparse but drifting. Taste of ash on the air. Walking until there were no more glow-sticks anywhere before them on the path.

"Must have passed the last one."

"Blame the dark. Everything the same."

"Head back or overland?"

"Nothing like this when we walked the last time."

"Overland."

They left the path. Andrew leaving a glow-stick behind them. Running low. The wood rising before them. Curving. Swelling. Walking more cautiously. Facing smoke. Tasting it. The world very dark. They could see the fire. Off in the distance. Smoldering. Glowing. Red and angry. Like the wood was being eaten alive. Very little flame. They paced the fire. Parallel. Listening to the chatter and crackle of it. Like children giggling. Whispering.

So much like children whispering. They froze. Looking about. Swinging the flashlights this way and that. The only scent was smoke and fire. The only sound was voices whispering on the breeze. Disembodied. Unnatural. As if secret children were gos-

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siping about them. As if they might suddenly understand the words if only they struggled hard enough.

Nothing. The world was empty. The burnt offerings flickered and flared. The occasional flame sparked and danced. As if the fire was old. As if the flames had settled down. Eating away at themselves. Devouring the wood like bacteria dissolving skin and flesh. The gossip did not stop.

They walked slowly. Through smoke. Feeling cold. The chatter stopped. All at once. Like frogs found out in the night. Silence. Still as the grave. Cold as bone. No sound of flame biting wood. Smoldering light smeared red like old blood. The air like thick pungent incense locked in a tomb.

Flashlights played over cobwebs and moss dangling like dead men from trees. Not silver. Not dew-shine. Not spider's silken thread. Like flesh. Like skin stretched thin. Woven like thread. Clumped. Tangled in knots. Stretched thin as paper. Translucent. Pulsing. As if blood still flowed. Hearts yet beat. Lungs drawing breath. Stretched and mottled. Shed like skin. Watching them. Dripping. Damp. Glowing.

"Back," Andrew whispered. "Back."

They fell away. Slowly. Reluctantly. As if mesmerized. As if fighting against a steep slope. Walking on glass. Lose their feet with the slightest misstep. They faced the desecration. Never looking away. Eyes locked to it. Even as they stepped away. Tracing backward. Silently praying they didn't bump into branch, root or tree. Slip and fall. They fell back. Retreat.

"No good here," Andrew said, holstering the gun.

"It must burn."

"My God. My God," Henry said all but whispering. "Lord have mercy on your poor servants. They walk through the very shadow despoiling the world."

Andrew had the bag off Paul's shoulder. Lowered it to the earth. Began removing small bottles. Spread them before him. Broke seals. Pressed bits of rag into them. Watched them grow damp even as he brought forth more.

"Lighter," he said.

"It's in there."

"We need like a drink's carton. Why don't we have a six-pack?"

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"Never thought of it."

"You think we would have given what we do." Held two bottles out to Henry. "Put the ax down. Stop whimpering prayers and drop the ax. It's no good here. You're not a puppy. You're God's own righteous fury."

Henry looked at him as if remembering where he was. Lowered the ax to the ground. Accepted the two bottles. Andrew gave one to Paul. Picked up another. Held the lighter.

"Right, we're not going to have a lot of time," he said. Set Paul's rag to burning. Dropped the lighter in his belt. Grabbed another bottle.

They walked quickly back toward the desolation. All but running. Paul shared his fire with Henry. Then Andrew. They stopped before rotting tissue. Smoldering light. Breathing. Almost thinking.

"Heaven take you!" Henry screamed. Threw one bottle. The other. Spitting flame. Flashing. Swirling.

"God have mercy!" Paul threw his bottle. Andrew throwing one. Then the other.

Fire splashed and ran over cobwebs. Swept around branches like bone. Flesh and moss. Shimmering. Shining skin. Burning. Everything afire. The forest came alive. As if they had knocked over an anthill. Earth bubbling. Trees withering. Writhing. Smashing. Thrashing. Children screaming.

They ran. Screaming. Crying. Andrew fell next to the sportsbag. Slipping on earth and twigs and dust.

"Stop! Stop!"

No answer.

"Suffer women, children and fools," he said, grabbing a bottle. Another. Looking for space on his belt. Tried to hold two in one hand. The voices of whispering, weeping children were everywhere.

He ran back toward the hellish inferno. Bottle in each hand. Almost didn't stop. Almost ran right into the flames. Children screaming. Stench of burning flesh everywhere. Checked the damp rag in the seal. Threw. Light glistened, taking flame. As if the vary air had exploded. He ran around the abomination. Looking for darkness. Looking for untouched filth and decay. Cracked the

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seal on the other bottle. Stuffed a bit of rag. Waited. Watching. Searched for the lighter. Wondering if he had dropped it. Found it. Didn't want to spark. Fingers slipping. Finally, started the rag. Threw the bottle. World taking flame as if the sky had exploded.

Started to turn. Run back toward the sports-bag. Something fell out of the flames. Like a wild boar. Half-liquified sack of rage. Tendrils running off it. Melting like hot wax. Hysterical, laughing children. Andrew all but falling. Stepping sideways. Reaching for the gun. The thing shook as if it might stand. Andrew aimed carefully. Fired. Again and again. Creature tried to rise. Torso bending like a snake. Flopping. Writhing around. Burning like a gutted candle. He ran.

"Andrew! Andrew!" Paul was standing by the sports-bag. Turning. Spinning in fits and starts. Flashlight swirling wildly.

"Here! Paul! Here!" Screaming as if he stood in a wind-tunnel. Stopped before him. Touched his shoulder. "I think there's some flammables left! Had to crack the last one!"

"No, we have to find Henry!"

"There's still the salt! We have to contain it!"

"Henry! We have to find Henry!"

"Our duty!"

"The fire will cleanse!"

"Duty!"

"To our fellowship as well! Not just a game of chicken with the dark! We have to find Henry!"

The children were screaming silent screams of pain and fear with voices so hoarse and faint that there was nothing left of their cries but the whispers of fallen leaves among the trees.

"Henry," Andrew said, scooping up the sports-bag. "Henry." Looked about. "Flashlight." Began to scuff at the ground as if he might fall to his knees. "Flashlight."

"Dropped it. Here."

Andrew reached for the flashlight. Almost dropping the bag. Slipping from his shoulder. Dangling from his arm.

"I can help."

"No," Andrew said, holding the flashlight. Shaking it. Hoisting the bag to his shoulder. Shaking the flashlight again. Turning it on.

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"This way, I think." Paul began to walk. "We both ran. No light. I lost him."

They walked among trees, searching with flashlight beams. The fire behind them. Smoke surrounding them. Drifting. Billowing. Thick and burnt. They shouted for him as they walked. Trees and dark leaves. Heavy branches. Skeletal fingers. Dirt and dust. Light scurrying like a frightened mouse. Darting this way. That. They walked.

"Here! I'm here!"

They ran. Henry was leaning against a tree. Clutching at his stomach. All but doubled-over. As if he had been vomiting. His mouth was a smashed mess. As if he had bitten through a bag of blood.

"I'm fine. Fine." Twin lights flashing. Smothering his face. He spat. Groped at the lights as if they were spots sticky and stuck to his face.

They began to walk. Aimlessly. Wandering. Looking over their shoulder at the burning wood. Smoke in the air. Stinging. Hurting their eyes. They stumbled across the trail as if walking off a cliff. Turned. Began to follow the path. Slow. Faster when they spotted the first dull green glimmer of a glow-stick. They walked. Picking at the trail. Stumbling in the dark. Walking.

The cars before them. The forest behind. Collapsed against the cars. Slipping to the earth. Andrew sat, breathing hard. Staring at nothing. Started suddenly. Startled. As if shocked from sleep. The others not noticing. Nothing happened. The world was silent. And, nothing happened. He crawled to the back of his car. Opened the trunk. Pulled open a water jug. Poured half of it over his head. Shook. Rubbed at his hair. Groaning. Gagging. Took a sip. Spat. Took another. Spat it out, too. Took a long slow drink. Sat hunched over with the plastic jug in his lap.

Felt a burning pain in his chest as if a flaming tree was growing suddenly from out his heart. Moaning, strangled cry. Sudden burp like an all-mighty explosion escaped him. All but retching. Cry that was almost a scream drifting into laughter. Sat caressing the water jug as if nothing had happened.

Looked up. The others were watching him. Dead. Hollow. Tired eyes. Andrew crawled to his feet. Leaning on the car. Pulled

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the jug up behind him. Dragged it toward the others. Henry up-ended the jug over his head. Holding it with both hands. Andrew made his way back to the trunk of his car. Found another water jug. Gave it to Paul. Listened while they groaned and spat and cried.

"We have to torch it," he said. Silence. "Take two cars a safe distance. Come back for the third. Drive it elsewhere. Have it towed. No time. No time. Firemen will come. Arson investigators. We have to despoil the evidence."

"Unfortunate," Paul said.

"Expensive. Unavoidable. Necessary."

They sat for a long time staring at nothing. Saying nothing. Finally rose. Moved to the first car. Found another jug of flammables. Poured it slowly over the roof of the car. Hood. Little left for the seats. Paul and Henry took their car a short little way away. Andrew fought with the lighter. Finally started a rag to burning. Tossed it in the back seat. Flames spread. Cackling. Growing.

Andrew moved quickly to his car. Sat behind the wheel. Watching the car in front of him. Shook as if suddenly startled. Had forgotten where he was. What he was doing. Burning car in his eyes. Fumbled for his keys. Got the engine started. Pulled slowly into the road. Watching the flames. Henry's car moving. Andrew followed. Ignoring his rear-view mirror. Drove away.



They stopped at a small motel. Parking in back. Henry and Paul still had a room reserved. Two beds. Nobody cared. Falling wherever they may upon the mattresses. Nobody bothering to change or even crawl under the covers. Andrew finally removed his biker jacket. Nobody spoke.



"Can't remember the last time I saw an infestation out of doors."

"They happen."

"I know they happen. When was the last time we faced one?"

"Don't know. They're hard to notice. Don't get reported as often."

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"Hard to notice? Scared of the woods. People are always scared of the woods. Creepy-crawlies coming to get you. Cows mutilated. Animals ravaged. Pets tortured. People don't talk about it. Stay away."

"They tested that one actually. It's not true."

"Which one?"

"Cows, remember? Years ago. They tested that one. Turned out to be natural bloating and decay. Maggots. That kind-of thing."

"Nobody mutilates cows? What a world."

"You answered your own question, anyway. People don't talk about it. Simply shy away from pestilence in the great outdoors."

"Yeah, but this wasn't just in the great outdoors. This wasn't the heart of some forest where people hardly ever go. This was a National park. Forest. State park. Whatever. In the heart of civilization."

"Yeah, where were we anyway?"

"I think it was a historic monument or something."

"Was it?"

"I don't know. Just followed the directions."

"It'll bring the police. Firemen for sure. Can't have our historic treasures damaged."

"Think we got them all?"

"I sincerely hope so."

"Think they'll find the bodies?"

"Simon. Kenneth."

"I don't think I had seen either one of them in years."

"Good men."

"Yes."

"Not even that far and yet we haven't seen them."

"Never find the bodies."

"No warning. Wholly unprepared. Hadn't seen them. No community. No hope. This can't go on."

"Not really our fault. What were those things?"

"Not our fault? The company is failing. Our brotherhood is floundering. They should have known. Heard about Nicholas. I made no secret. What it did to him. It did not fear us."

"Did not fear us. Looking so human. Did not fear us. What were those things?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"It's all well and good to talk. Should have spread the word. But, you're forgetting one thing. We don't talk about them. We can't talk about them."

"The lady Katherine said we must."

"The ladies Katherine say whatever they like. You have to be careful around them."

"I still can't believe you consulted them. Talked to them."

"What of it?"

"Well, look what you were wearing, man. What was that? Body armor? Made you look like a Flamenco dancer."

"Best I could do on short notice."

"Not my point. Not his point. Wearing body armor? Look what they're doing to you. We don't need body armor. The Lord is our armor and shield."

"All the good it did Ken and Simon. Nicholas. How's your arm, Paul?"

"It hurts."

"Test of our faith. And, what are you doing with a gun?"

"Where we live. Of course, I have a gun. Don't you?"

"Well, yes, but I don't take it into the field."

"Neither do I. Special circumstances."

"But, it's not what we do. No wonder they didn't fear us."

"Maybe, it should be what we do. Maybe, if we adapted with the times, it wouldn't be a test of faith."

"I can see it now. Guns instead of crosses and torches. Technology instead of faith."

"You yourself said Douglas is leading us astray."

"I agreed that he is surrounded by weaklings and cowards."

"There's your lack of faith. Why they don't fear weaklings and cowards."

"Okay, enough, you two. That we can rectify. Given time."

"True enough. Given time."

"Douglas won't listen to me."

"We shall see what we can do. Given time."

"Given time."

"Fellowship is floundering. Given time."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

Andrew opened the apartment door. Stepped within. Walking slowly, as if he had not slept. Stood, holding his shoulder bag. The motorcycle jacket draped over it. Let the bag slip to the floor. Drifting, as if gravity held no sway.

Beth was upon him. No warning. Almost knocking him down. Arms around him. Holding. Squeezing him hard. He drew his arms together. Enfolding her. Saying nothing. Smelling her hair. Drinking in the scent of baby-powder. Honeysuckle. Lavender.

"Bastard." She hit him. "You bastard." Fists together. Half-heartedly. On the shoulder. In the arm. Pulling away. Hitting him. More determinedly. Again and again. "Don't ever do that again."

"I will always come back." Holding her.

"Don't you ever leave me like that again."

"I will always come back."



Resting together. Blankets turned down. Sheets rumpled. Half-covered. Andrew stroking Beth's hair. Letting it drift between his fingers.

"It never should have gotten so bad."

"I know," Beth said. Eyes closed.

"The secrets. The lack of communication. Never should have gotten so bad."

"I know."

"We could have stopped this. We should have stopped this."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Cowards."

"Don't let them make it your fault."

"It might as well have been."

"You've done so much." Taking his hand. Holding his arm. "Don't take this on yourself."

"Burden of responsibility. They said it would be mine."

"Who?"

"The ladies Katherine. Said I would be first of the company."

"Is that what we're calling them now? The ladies Katherine?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Said I would be first."

"They didn't say when."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"It'll never happen now. All that hard work wasted. Calling me coward. Them. Calling me coward."

"Give it time."

"No."

"They didn't say it would be tomorrow."

"They also said I would die if I went to Hatfield."

"No, don't. They said. Don't go."

"They told me I would die."

"They were wrong." Whisper.

"Yes, they were wrong. What else were they wrong about?"

"Not worth considering."

"I never had the strongest support. Listening to them. Gone. All gone. I'll never swing a no-confidence vote."

"They'll keep forcing you into the field."

"They'll never vote my elevation even with a no-confidence vote."

"Give it up."

"The calling? I could never give up the calling."

"I know."

"Looks like I'll have to kill him."

"Who?"

"Douglas."

"What?"

"No vote. No election. No elevation. That only leaves one option."

"What are you talking about?" Eyes open. Turning. Trying to look at him.

"It's a legitimate means of ascension within the company."

"Kill Douglas?"

"Yes."

"How could it possibly be legitimate?"

"We are a very old company. Our ways are ancient. Tradition is paramount."

"Don't joke," she said, pulling away. Looking at him. "This isn't funny."

"Who's joking? I mean. I'm not actually saying we should kill him, but it would be a legitimate way to become first of the company. The others would have to accept me."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"But, it's wrong. The police."

"Don't drag those idiots into this. They never notice anything. The corruption. The disappearances. Albinos living in communes in the hills. Nothing."

"But, thou shall not kill. It's still wrong."

"And, I'm not that desperate. Even for the greater good. I wasn't serious."

"It can't be what they meant."

"Exactly."

"Put you in a position where you would have no choice but to kill him."

"What?"

"Tell you that you will be first so you would start a no-confidence whisper campaign. Then, tell you not to go to Hatfield so that others would go in your place. Undermining the whole campaign. Ensuring Douglas would be first unless you killed him." Sitting on her knees. Looking at him.

"No, it doesn't work like that. It's not a tapestry. Chess game. They're not pulling strings."

"Why? Because they said so?"

"Are you suggesting. What are you suggesting?" Hand to his forehead. "Look. Why would they want Douglas murdered?"

"Look at the way he allows them to be treated."

"That's not. Why would. They want the greater good."

"Yes, the greater good. You just said killing him for the greater good."

"No, I didn't."

"You said you would kill him for the greater good."

"I meant I wouldn't kill him. Not even for the greater good."

"But, it would be. For the greater good."

"No. No one would believe that."

"Cowards. Surrounded by sycophants. Deterioration of the whole company."

"And, murder is really going to stop that, is it?"

"For the greater good. All the changes you could make. You wouldn't have to go into the field any more."

"Okay, I think we've pushed this fantasy about as far as it can go."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes," she said, brushing a hand through her hair. Eyes closed. "We'll think of something. There must be a way short of killing him."

"Of course, there must be. We'll let things cool off. Take up the challenge again. See who can be swayed to my point of view."

"Rest. Too much excitement. Not thinking clearly."

"Exactly. Once people realize how many we've lost recently. They'll come around."

"They'll come around. Given time."

"Given time."



"How's your arm?"

"Not as bad as it looks."

"Well, I hope you learned your lesson."

"Oh, most certainly. Bandages itch like crazy."

"Not quite the lesson. But, yes. They do at that, don't they?"

"Worst part is not being able to give them a proper scratch. Can't get to what really itches. Scratch too hard. Try to get under. I get scolded."

"The burden of responsibility."

"Yes, suffer for the greater good. Bitter comfort that."

"The greater good. Funny you should mention that."

"Oh, you think it's funny?"

"Things we do for the greater good."

"Like run around in a suit and tie. Lot of good that does against sharp teeth and claws."

"Or, speak out of turn. Or, speak without really having permission. I didn't, did I. A note from them isn't automatic permission to call on them."

"No, technically, it's not."

"Yes, I am sorry about that."

"You have to be careful around them, Andrew. They're not to be trusted."

"And yet, we go to them. Use them."

"Andrew."

"They want to help."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes, that's true. They just. It's not like. They have their own way of doing things."

"No argument."

"Yes, well. Let's not worry about that. You just. It's best not to get caught up in their mindset. Easy to lose sight. Lose focus."

"You seem to manage it."

"Yes, well. Itches like crazy."

"I did warn you about that. Not fearing us."

"Well, it's not like we knew that's what we would find. Could have mentioned that in the note."

"They said I would have gone. If they had mentioned the humanoids. Humaforms. Whatever. I wouldn't have listened."

"You didn't listen."

"After consulting them. I don't. Were they wrong? Were they right? I don't know. Makes my head hurt."

"They once told me that I would be first."

"What?"

"Well, not exactly. They said my heirs would reign or something fanciful like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, who knows? The company doesn't follow lineage or legacies. So, it couldn't have been literal."

"You didn't ask?"

"I don't ask."

"Really."

"I don't ask."

"If you say so."

"I don't ask, Andrew. I never ask. That's important. I never. Okay, it's impossible to never ask. Tie yourself in knots. You can get away with the occasional question."

"They let it slip."

"Yes, they're not heartless. They let the occasional question slide. Innocuous question. But, not about prophecy. Predictions. I can't ask about the whole children leading thing. Too much. They want me to ask. I can tell. But, it's too much."

"What could it mean?"

"It's too much. Drive you mad."

"Missed opportunity? Warning? Like Hatfield?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Have my own theory."

"Oh, let's hear it."

"Like I said. Not literal. My heirs would lead. Could mean my ideas. Like-minded individuals. People like you."

"What?"

"Well, you've got to agree we have similar opinions about the state of the company. You're a little more outspoken than I like, but somebody has to be, I suppose."

"Thanks."

"No, really. You draw attention. Then, the more moderate. The more rationale voices will be heard."

"Oh, thank you very much for that."

"You're too outspoken, Andrew. You know that."

"Somebody has to be."

"Look what it's gotten you."

"Everything it's gotten me."

"You won't stop complaining about it. Bite your tongue, Andrew. Just once."

"All the good it's gotten me. Somebody has to do it. Something has to be done."

"My heirs, Andrew. My heirs. My ideas. My way of thinking."

"But, not you."

"What?"

"You're ideas. But, not you."

"What a thing to say."

"You'll never be first."

"I don't want to be first."

"No, you just want your ideas to be first. The power behind the throne."

"Andrew."

"What?"

"We all want what's best for the company."

"Do we?"

"Yes."

"Even the cowards and sycophants?"

"They think they do. They've lost sight. Blinded by fear."

"Best for the company?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"You know what I mean. We can effect change. We can make a difference."

"It will just take time, will it?"

"Yes, it will."

"Time we do not know we have."

"No reason not to try."

"You still won't be first, you know."

"Neither will you."

"Thanks. Too much the troublemaker, I know."

"What about Henry?"

"Henry?"

"Sure, throw our weight behind him. Can't you just see him as first?"

"No, actually. But, I suppose. Best we can do."

"We'll just have to pull the strings."

"Will we?"

"Yes."

"Small consolation."

"Best we can hope for."

"Scary thought."

"He won't like it either."

"That's almost funny."

"So, we'll see. Take things slow?"

"Yes, we will just have to see."



"Well, if it isn't Mr. Peacock."

"Thought I was a flamingo."

"Flamenco dancer then."

"Best I could do on short notice."

"Best you could do would have been the proper attire."

"Which worked so well for you and Paul, didn't it?"

"Still would have been the proper attire."

"I sense I'm wasting my time here."

"Oh, you think?"

"What happened to our shared interests? Speak out against fear and corruption?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I didn't mean trade our faith in for the barrel of a gun."

"There were special circumstances."

"And, what will they be next time?"

"There won't be a next time."

"You say that now. So sure you are that we will never see another like in the woods."

"We'll find another way."

"I will not put my faith in a gun."

"No one is asking you to."

"Yes, they will. They have. You have, Andrew."

"No, special circumstances. A gun still wouldn't work on most. It barely worked this time."

"What next time, then?"

"What it takes. Whatever works. We must meet the situation on its own terms."

"And, if those terms should evolve to the point we no longer recognize each other? What then?"

"It won't come to that."

"I am assured, Mr. Peacock."

"Yes, I guess you are."



"Mrs. Summerset."

"Mrs. Carver."

"Quiet morning, I see."

"Yes, three. Almost a crowd."

"Any more and you might actually hear a pin drop."

"We'll just have to risk it."

"Look at them. Studying so industriously. Whatever is it they seek, I wonder."

"That would require imagination, I suppose."

"Would it? Which part?"

"Yes."

"He wasn't a coward after all, was he?"

"Who? Your husband? Wasn't it fear of being revealed for the coward that he is what finally drove him to go?"

"Never."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Oh, I forget. He left before our little talk the other day, did he?"

"Andrew is no coward. They wouldn't let him go. He defied them."

"Only after he sent others to salt the ground before him. Ken and Simon are grateful he waited to defy them, I'm sure."

"Ken and Simon knew their duty. Henry. Paul. Knew their duty. When they told Andrew not to go. They all knew."

"Ours is not to question why."

"Duty is not the same thing as unquestioning obedience."

"What an odd thing to say."

"The only oddity I see are those who say nothing about the cowards that surround us yet cry cowardice when the one brave man obeys orders."

"Henry is no coward."

"Really?"

"When the bell rang out danger, danger, my husband said which way? Which way?"

"As did mine, Rebecca. And, it was the solemn bell that rang for my husband, if you recall. No call of danger. No call to action. The solemn bell. The mournful tone. And, they said. Don't go. Don't go. He stayed his hand, and yet, when he heard the extent of the danger, he went all the same. My husband is no coward, Rebecca. Don't you ever forget it."

"Fanciful words, dear Elizabeth. I do believe I need that folio from the back to answer this letter. If you would excuse me, dear."

"But, of course, I think I can handle our crowd of three."

"Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. No fear. Never fear."



Beth and Andrew sat at a corner of the dining room table so that their knees might touch and their feet rub together. Dinner was warm sandwiches. Roast chicken. Heirloom tomatoes. Stone-ground mustard. Thinly sliced Parmesan. Endive.

"You were right," Beth said. Her glass of Riesling touched to her lips.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Oh?"

"Right there in the bylaws. Impeachment and ascension through assassination."

"No, we've been over this."

"There's precedent for it and everything."

"It's not right. You said so yourself. Thou shall not kill."

"The things you can learn at the conservatory."

"I wasn't serious, Beth. You don't preserve life by killing." Knife resting on the edge of his plate.

"When the first of the company has lost his way. Corrupt. Faltering. The members of the company act as their own judge and jury. I can give you names. Dates."

"I know those stories, too. We joke about them. Rule of the sword. How recent was the last one?"

"Not that long ago actually. They tried to hush it up."

"Well, of course, they did. Because it was wrong."

"It was still necessary."

"Never necessary." Knife on his plate. Stabbing. Stabbing.

"The first of the company isn't an inheritance. It's a sacred trust. If the company is brought low, there is cause for reparations."

"Which we are working toward. It will just take time."

"Luxury. What of your revelation cult? Conspiracy against the company?"

"I don't." Incense. Swirling dancers. "I don't." Symbols. The forest erupting. "I won't serve their purpose. Bring the company low sowing dissent. Force people to choose sides."

"You've lost sight of the danger."

"Never. It's almost blinding."

"The cowards and sycophants. Calling us cowards. Hypocrites. The best defense is to attack. Accuse your accuser of the very thing that you are."

"We are working on that. Call for reorganization. Call for fresh blood."

"They'll never give you credit."

"Credit isn't exactly the point."

"Force you into the field. Again and again and again. Silence you so that you can never ask for credit. Recognition."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

He took her hand. Brought her fingers to his lips. Stabbing. Stabbing.

"I will be first."

She looked away.

"It will just happen in its own time," he said. "The cowards will be put in their place. The revelation cult will fail. The company will be strong."

She gripped his hand. Fingers entwined. Saying nothing.



Kate was waiting for him, standing next to the sunken couch. Barefoot. Bare arms. Silken robes so much like a nightgown. Sash slipping. Barely tied. Robes all but falling open. The city behind her. Lost. Hidden. Curtains drawn closed. Filtered light.

"Why did you say I would be first," Andrew asked.

"Because you will be first."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it is true."

"How can you know?"

"I have seen it."

"Paul. Doesn't know. Keeping secrets. Will he know I was here?"

Kate watched him with quiet eyes.

"Will he ask? He never asks." Looked away. "Will you tell him?" Moving. Unable to stand still. "What am I doing? Must be." Watching her. "Mad? You must be mad to believe you can see the future." Turning. Pointing. "Not a tapestry. You said. Did you say? More like a jigsaw puzzle. How could you know?"

Nothing. Silence. Sliver of a smile. Shrug of shoulders.

"You also said I would die."

"If you had gone to Hatfield."

"I did go to Hatfield." Spread his arms wide.

"But not when you would have died."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Because I didn't know."

Andrew turned. Paced away.

"Why do I feel like you just said *because I didn't ask?*" Turning.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

Looking. She hadn't moved. Hands together. Head tilted to one side. Following him with her eyes. "The Observer Effect, is it?"

"Doesn't work that way. The act of observation does not change the outcome. Knowing that something will happen if other events precede it is not the same thing as knowing something will happen."

"Now, you're just saying the first thing that comes to mind."

"No." Head on one side. "Now, I say *you didn't ask*."

Facing her. Wanting to grab her. Strike her. Shake her. Saying nothing.

"Less tapestry. More jigsaw puzzle," she said. "Broken stain-glass mirror."

"Window."

"Mirror."

Turned away from her.

"Why do you assume there's only one way? Direct observation. Pieces fitted together like a puzzle. Ripped-up picture." Looking straight ahead as if he wasn't there. "Why not inference? Guesswork? Cause and effect? Shadows on the wall."

"You told Paul that he would be first."

"Beautiful. Change the subject. But, no. He will not be first of the company."

"Oh, of course. His children. His heirs. Or whatever you said."

"Whatever was said."

"But, what does it mean?"

Silence. Still as a statue never needing to breathe.

"Why should I listen?" he said. "It's all words. Stuff and nonsense."

"You cloud our judgment."

Froze. Looked to her.

"Anger. Hostility. Anxiety. Stress." She turned, walking toward the couch. "Sit, please." Found a spot on the couch herself. Rested her knees beneath her. "You're no good to us if you cannot relax." Flicker of a smile. Serious eyes. Hand fluttering. Brushed at her sleeve. "Focused. Meditative. Embrace the divine."

He approached the couch slowly, watching her. She had reached for him. Touching him. On the couch.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Tense," she said. "So tense. Stressful. Like a wire pulled suddenly taunt. Humming. Vibrating. Will it snap?"

The other woman. Bollywood starlet. Robes flowing. Had knelt before him.

"I don't trust you." His voice a whisper.

She laughed like a great explosion of grief suddenly set free.

"Nobody does," she said. Hand at her eyes, brushing, as if searching for tears.

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because you want to believe that you will be first."

"That's not a reason." He sank to the couch. Away from her. Facing her. "That's wishful thinking. That's a result."

"Because we want what's best for the company."

"What is best for the company? Not I as first. Dissension and turmoil you said."

"Aye, that I said. Or rather, another one of us said. We're not one voice with many mouths. Not literally, anyway. It was decided the news would not sound right coming from one who had partaken of the ritual that night."

"Soften the blow, as it were? Not by much."

"Dissension and turmoil. Sound and fury. These things can lead to better things."

"That's my reign, is it? Full of sound and fury? To what end?"

"Maybe you are what the company needs in order to become what it needs to be."

He sank deep into the cushion, feeling it press into his back, as if a sudden storm was trying to grind him into dust. Looking to the ceiling. His eyes burned. Hand to his face. Burned like ice.

"At what cost?" he said. Voice a whisper. "What price too high?"
Silence.

He looked at the lady Kate. Her robes loose and flowing. Hint of skin. Bare chest beneath. Slipping. Exposed knee. Naked thigh. Bare feet.

"How do I become first of the company?"

Nothing. Silence. Pale skin. Short hair. Freckles.

"What do I do to become first of the company?"

Kate said nothing. Only watched him. Quiet eyes.

"What kind of monster must I become?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"The first step in building a new foundation is to pull the old building down."

His eyes burned so fierce he cried out as if he had been stabbed in the face with a white hot iron brand. Doubling over. The scream escaped him. Shoulders shook. Hands to his face. Dry-heaving sobs. Shuddering. Lungs burning. Trying to breathe. Air like ice.

"Let go. Let go," she said, touching him. Hand on his shoulder. Dagger. Tumbling shadows. Stabbing. Stabbing.

"It is too much," she said. Arm around his back. Stroking his shoulder. "So much pressure. So much tension. Let it go. Before you break."

"And, what good would I be then?"

"What good are you to the cause if you cannot stand against the dark? You must relax. We can help."

"I'm sure."

"You're no good to us if you cannot relax. White noise splattered across the tapestry."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"We can help."

"I'm not here for that." Pulling away. Trying to stand. "I'm not like that." The young Katherine had slammed the door in his face.

Kate let him go.

"We all have expectations," she said.

"Do we?"

"Like following a groove in a path. Needle. Record. We don't even know. Blind man's destiny."

"I'm in denial, am I?"

"We have expectations," she said, holding a hand to her heart. "My sisters and I. Expectations of behavior that we do not even know we have. So used to one behavior that we forget there are others."

Andrew stood stock-still, watching her.

"What does Paul make you do?"

"Nothing, actually." Weak smile. "Nothing we've been dancing around, anyway. Before. He hasn't been our advocate with the company that long."

"I am sorry."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

She moved, suddenly. As if she would hit him. Slipping. Almost falling from the couch. Holding still. Not breathing. Slapping his hand away when he tried to touch her. He stepped back. Found another spot on the couch. Sat. Watching her. Kate settled back on her cushion. Legs folded beneath her. Back held straight. Watched him with quiet, serious eyes.

"You don't like Douglas' leadership of the company, do you?" he said.

"No."

"Could that be clouding your judgment?"

Silence.

"Wanting it so badly that it is all you can see?" Watching her.

"Then why didn't we tell Paul that he would be first?"

"Because you were building up to it? Because he wouldn't have believed you?"

"Because he wouldn't have gone through with it?"

Andrew watched the carpet. Looked for shadows slipping and creeping across the floor.

"What will you do," Kate asked.

"Don't you know?"

"There's more than one reason to ask a question."



"What is this?"

"An invitation."

"To what?"

"You, Andrew, have been invited to Douglas' country home."

"Why?"

"A peace offering, I assume. For all of your hard work. Hatfield. Courage in the face of danger."

"Rub it in, why don't you?"

"What?"

"That's not what they all say. Courage."

"And yet, you went all the same."

"That I did."

"It's a peace offering, Andrew. Accept it for what it is."

"I'm honored, I suppose."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes, you should be."



"It's perfect."

"He is trying to silence me, I suppose. How can I speak out against him after being so honored with a visit to the country estates?"

"In the far country. Few people around. Nobody to hear for miles and miles."

"I would have to be downright ungrateful."

"Be ungrateful then. We must plan. I can research the estates at the conservatory. Is it a private invitation? How many others will be there?"

"Oh, that would be just too useful, wouldn't it?"

"We must know."

"Yes, we must."

"Don't falter now."

"Is it my decision?"

"What?"

"Following a track. Trail of breadcrumbs laid out before me."

"If it will help."

"Absolved of guilt. Is that why?"

"You will be first. You said so."

"They said so."

"They also said you would die."

"Yes."

"If you made a choice."

"They did."

"You made a choice."

"I did."

"They say what will come. They don't always say how. Why. They leave out the *if*."

"Important that. It will rain in the morning *if*."

"It is still your choice. You will be first *if*."

"They don't fill in the *if*."

"You make the *if*. Your decisions. Your choice."

"For the greater good."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"The greater good."

"Still my decisions that lead to the greater good."

"The changes you will make. Restructuring. Reorganization.
Drive out corruption. Cowardice."

"Save the company."

"Share the burden. Spread the risk. You won't have to risk so
much in the field."

"So, I shall become the coward at the heart of the company."

"No."

"Replace one corruption with another."

"Never."

"I will not sit by."

"You will do so much."

"I will not risk others where I would not risk my own."

"It will not be risk."

"A shared burden is lightly carried by all."

"Yes."

"All but one?"

"What?"

"One burden I cannot share."

"All can be shared."

"No, I will be first."

"Yes."

"I will be first. *If*."

"Yes."

"I cannot share the *if*."

"You can."

"My burden to make. My decision to bear."

"Share it with me."

"No."

"Yes."

"I mean. How?"

"Share the secret with me."

"No."

"You already have."

"No."

"Oh, do not grieve. I can bear it. We are one flesh, are we not?"

"Man and wife?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"There is no burden we cannot shoulder."

"Together."

"No secret. No shame. No price. For the greater good."

"Greater good."

"When your hands shake. When you think of the price. Share it with me. I will hold you. Help carry the burden. Together, we are one."

"Together."

"I love you."

"Together."



"Read."

"What is it?"

"Report from distant lands."

"Half-way across the country." Andrew's eye ran down the page. "No."

"Yes."

"Another?"

"How many is that? I've lost count."

"Four? Five?" Gripping the page as if standing in a hurricane.

"Circles. Patterns. Smearred blood."

"No bodies."

"Nothing. Nobody."

"This is not good."

"No trace. No sign. No rhyme. No reason."

"Abandoned house. Far from anywhere."

"No diaries. No notebooks. No why."

"I fear you're right."

"Six months. How many in six months?"

"This is too much for coincidence."

"It still could be."

"Oh, now you play the advocate? Because the ladies neither helped nor disproved your theory?"

"Conspiracy."

"Another group out there."

"Revelation cult."

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"A what?"

"Millennium cult is overused. Ineffectual. Nobody takes it seriously."

"Revelation cult?"

"Beth liked the sound of it."

"I'm sure."

"This cannot stand." Crumpled the report. Pages protesting.

"I know."

"We must do something."

"I know."

"Must get ahead of this. Pursue leads. Understand."

"It's not an issue of desire. One of resources. Feet on the ground."

"Recruitment drive. Training. No, no time. We need to pursue this now."

"Again, we already know what Douglas is going to say."

"Douglas will say anything as long as he doesn't actually have to do anything."

"I was thinking of the big picture, actually."

"Oh, yes. The one that only he can see. The one that only he understands. The one that only he is qualified to understand."

"He has a point."

"Well, what are these?" Shook the papers in his fist. "What reports are we too blind to notice?"

"I don't know. That's kind of the point."

"Exactly, yes. Kind of the point. Worthy. We're not worthy."

"Or, too focused on our own little corner of the world."

"What he says. What he always says. Never has to show us. Explain himself."

"Maybe he already knows." Paul gestured vaguely at the reports.

"Again, that's the point. We don't know. Maybe he does. Maybe he doesn't. We don't know."

"We could bring it to his attention. No need to lead off with the request to appropriate resources."

"I could bring it up this weekend."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten about that."

"Ever been?"

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"To the country estate? Yes, actually. Because of the ladies."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. It's a special honor. Responsibility. Not given lightly."

"What's it like? The estate."

"It's nice enough, I suppose. Bit ostentacions. Bit out of the way. There are pictures around here somewhere I'm sure."

"Secluded?"

"The estate. House. Garden. Grounds. But, surely, you've been."

"No. Or, at least so long ago that I've forgotten."

"It's a strange hole you've dug. So important to the company. And yet, so disliked. I'm still not sure how you managed it."

"Yes, you do. What have I done for them lately?"

"Well, look what you have done for them lately. Advantage to their short attention span. Back in their good graces."

"I don't know if I would go that far."

"They've made the peace offering."

"We shall see how well it goes over when I mention the conspiracy."

"Yes, be careful how you bring that up."

"Taking bets on how quickly I can be thrown out?"

"Not that I would tell you if we were. Don't want to invalidate the standings."

"This weekend." Andrew touched the crumpled report to his chin.

"Yes, don't blow it this weekend."

"The conspiracy must fall. The company must survive."

"We're still a long way from proving a conspiracy."

"And yet, it will be very much on my mind this weekend. Very much on my mind."



Andrew checked the car out of the yard. Drove. Beth looking out the window. Watching the countryside slide past. The city far behind them. An hour on the road. Two. Saying little. Keeping their thoughts to themselves as if words were deeply guarded secrets. Surrounded by other cars even on the far roads away from the

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city as if all had fled if only for the weekend. Cars slowly slipping away. Many around them. Stalking. Pacing. Drifting. Letting the distance grow. Never alone. Never the road to themselves. Distances growing. Road slipping. Growing thin. Winding. Tree-lined. Only other car far behind them.

Finally, a turn off. One-lane road. Ornate gateway. Long drive over grounds. Rows of trees. Manicured fields. Reminding Andrew of nothing so much as an exclusive golf course. They stopped at the mansion. Wide oval driveway. Fountain. Servants were waiting as if their approach had been watched on close-circuit video. Valets took their luggage. Another took their car to wherever the garage was hidden. They followed another through hallways and up extravagantly carved and polished stairways to their rooms.

There was a sitting room and bedroom. Joined but separate. Lacking only a door. A curtain could be drawn between the two. Bathroom was white tile. Two sinks. Raised tub that could easily hold two. Separate shower like a whole glass room all to itself. The luggage appeared while they were exploring the bath. Opened on folding trays but left for them to unpack. They flopped on the bed, ignoring their bags.

"What time did they say?"

"Coffee at three in the garden, I think," Beth said. "Didn't catch when's supper."

"God, coffee at three. Why not high tea?"

"Didn't want to sound too posh. We did secede from the British, you know."

"Did we? I had forgotten."

"Easy to forget in this place. Can you believe it? At least the servants are only day-help. They get to go home at night and have lives. Not required to live on the grounds."

"Oh, we serve ourselves supper, do we? New meaning to the term buffet?"

"No, they get another crew in to do that. Like fancy caterers or something."

"What? Every night?"

"Well, it's not like they run this place every night. Mostly just a summer and long-weekend thing, isn't it? I see Maribeth all the

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time in the city. Well, not all the time. I've run into her once or twice. She even visited the conservatory once."

"Douglas is constantly at the club."

"There, you see? All the servants and hired help get to have lives. There's only one housekeeper on the night-shift."

"Kind-of leaves us on our own if we have a sudden craving in the middle of the night."

"Oh, I'm sure he can call in any number of cooks and kitchen staff at need. Can probably handled coffee. Toast. Reheating leftovers. All by himself."

"Frugal and practical."

"Works to our advantage, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Andrew said. Eyes closed. Staring at the ceiling.

"Have you seen the guest list?"

"No, but I understand few actually stay over. Most people they invite live in the area."

"Well, that works to our purposes, too."

"We're the poor relations being shown a world above our station. They have dignity and culture. Refined traits without which they would just be vacuously selfish people with money."

"Such kind things to say about our hosts."

"No wonder they lead. They've got nothing else to do. Leading worthless and empty lives."

"We don't get the house if that's what you're getting at."

"They don't deserve it, do they. Didn't earn it. Didn't do nothing."

"Nobody deserves. It's all luck."

"Oh, there are those who would disagree. Natural aristocracy and all of that."

"Oh, yes. And who said that? Some rich bloke trying to justify his own. Like you said. Might as well drag manifest destiny into it while you're at it."

"I'm inherently special because. Well, because I am."

"Not that we've got any right to complain. We're comfortably upper middle-class envying the luxury and privileges that the truly upper-class take for granted. When was the last time we actually wanted for anything?"

"Only time."

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"Only time, I grant you."

Andrew rose, slipping slowly from the bed. Went to one of the suitcases and began rummaging through it. Found a long knife like an ornamental dagger hidden among his clothes.

"Why do they deserve to be first?" he said, holding the knife in his hands. Studying it. "By what right? Not intelligence, surely."

"Certainly not intelligence."

"Manifest destiny, indeed."



"I don't recognize anyone here."

"Well, they are mostly from the conservatory, I think," Beth said. "I recognize a few of the company."

"I thought you said you hardly knew any of the company anymore."

"I thought you said you knew them all."

Slip of a smile. Sip of coffee.

"Trying to isolate me," Andrew said. "Show me that the company is so much greater than I think it is."

"And here I thought there were so few."

"There are. There are. Not what we once were."

"And, the grass was greener, too. Look, it's kind-of drab, isn't it? Not what it once was."

"They certainly fertilize it enough."

"Oh, that's bad."

"At least it doesn't smell." Scuffed his foot. "They're all researchers and librarians, I'm sure. Why I don't recognize anyone. Why you recognize so many."

"Hiding in the conservatory, are they?"

"The fields too good for them."

"This is a lawn not a field, dear."

"I dread the day they fear even the lawn. Speaking of which, I don't see Douglas anywhere."

"Busy, I'm sure. May still be en route from the city."

"Demonstrating his importance. How hard he works."

"How hard do you work? Rest while you can."

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"While the work piles up. Because he makes us wait to show us how much he sacrifices for the company."

"You brought work with you, did you?"

Took a sip of his coffee.

"You're supposed to be resting," Beth said, swatting his arm.

"Is that why we're here? We mixed our signals."

"Yes, well. Good cover, I suppose."

"I still don't recognize anybody."

"Maribeth is around here somewhere. I'll introduce you."



"Who is that over there?"

"Oh, that looks like Elizabeth Carver and her husband Andrew."

"Andrew Carver, really? He doesn't look stooped or craven."

"Oh, hush. Beth is really very nice."

"She must be a saint to put up with him. He's one of those people who isn't happy unless he's complaining. Nothing's so good that he can't find fault with it."

"No wonder she spends so much time at the conservatory. She's really very good with people."

"However did he swindle an invitation here?"

"I'll try to find out from Maribeth. It must be because of Elizabeth. She really is a wonder at the conservatory. Get's along with everybody. Oh, except she seems to be feuding with Rebecca over the whole Hatfield thing."

"Oh, yes. I heard about Hatfield."

"I hope they patch things up soon. Beth really is trying. Rebecca simply will not forgive her."



Dinner was at a long table. Douglas seated at one end. Two rows of people falling away from him. Maribeth, the first person upon his right. Andrew and Beth were at the far end of the table, facing each other. Nobody on the very end. Door closest to the kitchen. Waiters and caterers constantly slipping in and out of the room. The door soundlessly but almost constantly in motion. The table

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was too wide to reach across and hold hands. Too far to touch feet or toes. Conversation was turned toward the far end of the table as if all were trying to carry on private conversations with Douglas. The food was over-prepared and bland. The wine was very good.



"What time is it?"

"Late. Very late," Andrew said. Stage-whisper.

"Do you think everyone is asleep?"

"I certainly hope so."

"Douglas certainly drank enough after supper. You could tell who was staying and who still had to drive."

"Not that many staying."

"How many were there at dinner?"

"Twenty? Thirty? I lost count."

"We're sure they are asleep?"

"Unless they play some kind of midnight game we don't know about."

"You mean like a key party? Just waiting for the boring people like us to trundle off to bed?"

"Yes, exactly. Tiptoeing around in the wee hours of the morning."

"You know they used to sound gongs. The servants would ring a gong just before sunrise so people had time to scamper back to their own beds. Avoiding eye contact. People crashing into each other in the halls."

"We'll try to avoid that."

"There is the one housekeeper on the night-shift. Conceivably, he could ring a bell or something before daybreak."

"Now, there's a thought to give one pause. What if Douglas isn't in his own bed?"

"Oh, don't lose heart now. When will we get another chance?"

"We? I'm the only one who's going to enter his room."

"You know what I mean. Besides, I have my role to play."

"Bed-hopping, what a thought. I don't know. I don't know."

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"Courage, dear. Douglas won't tiptoe away. The women come to him."

"No, that's not how. The men go to the women. Something about the heart of a woman's domain is the bedroom."

"Oh? And how do you know so much about bed-hopping? The ladies teach you?"

"No. That's not." Held the knife as if weighing it. "This could go so wrong."

"Look at me, Andrew." Hands on her hips. Silk robe. Loosely tied. "You face danger every time you go into the field. How is this different?"

"Said it yourself. Thou shall not kill."

"And you convinced me otherwise."

Eyes closed. Facing the floor. Knife was a rock. Cold. Heavy. Hard to hold.

"Look at me," Beth said. "This is for the greater good. You said so. Don't get cold feet now."

"The greater good," he said, gripping the knife hard.

"How many have died needlessly?" She stood tall, brushing a hand down her robe. "Listen. In another minute, I'm going to walk out that door to distract the housekeeper any way that I can. I will do whatever it takes to give you free rein of this house so that you may do what is necessary." She ran her hand down her robe again. Bare leg slipped ever so briefly from between the folds. Naked beneath. She wore nothing beneath the robe. "It's not what I want. It's what I'm prepared to do."

Andrew stood. Knife in his hand.

"Go," he said.

"He didn't quite look like a college kid. The bored middle-aged wives of rich men probably make passes at him all the time. He may still prove to be chivalrous." She turned for the door. "Do you remember the way?" Asked over her shoulder.

"Yes."

"It wasn't exactly a tour." Said at the door. "Best I could manage out of Maribeth."

"I remember."

"Be strong." Hand on the door as if defying it to be barred

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against her. "I love you," she said and was gone. The door slipping closed behind her.



The hallway was dark. Cast in moonlight. Drifting through distant windows. The night was silent as if the world had been turned off. Andrew paced slowly. Socks. No shoes. No slippers. Trying to step lightly. Listening to the floor creek.

Dark halls were where monsters drifted. Waiting. Silent. Watching. They caught them. Fought them. Trying to sneak upon them. More often than not driving them back. Wounded. Scarred. Trembling in silent moments long after. But drove them back.

So few. Drove them back. So few. Survived to watch the dawn. So few. Searching the shadows for more pits of pestilence and despair. So few. Nicholas had fallen. Stabbing. Stabbing. So few. He couldn't remember Jacob's face. So few. He would never see Simon or Ken again. So few. Paul's arm in a sling.

They hid in the libraries. Leaving so few. They cowered in the sunlight fearing the dark. The country road and the night's dark sky. Leaving so few. Douglas drew them in, surrounding himself. Forming a human barrier. Leaving so few. Wall of cowards. Frightened children. Turkeys crushing the center.

Andrew passed all the doors. Silent. Dark. Still. Pausing at the top of the stairs. Distant flicker. Little more than a nightlight. Held his breath. Listening. Touch of voices. All but whispering. Beth's voice. Giggles. Forced laughter.

He held the knife tight. Wanting to turn. Burning to scream down the stairs. Stab the man. Screaming. Stabbing. Stabbing. Trembling. Wanting to turn. It had not feared them. Stabbing. Struggling. Crying. Had not feared the light. Allowed to fester. Given time to grow.

Field teams failing to report. Scraping together what rumors they could. Stories. Hunting down shapes long after they had grown. Did not fear them. Too few to search. So few to hunt. Douglas wanted it that way.

Andrew left the light behind him. Following stairs. Hallways. Another door. Stopping. Feeling the cold weight in his hands.

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Thinking of faces. Eyes watching him. People turning away. Nicholas would never move again. No warning. They said he would be first. Put more people in the field. Gather. Stop the corruption. People would turn away. Unable to face him. But, they would be alive.

He pushed the door open, listening to it brush across the carpet, looking into darkness, glimpsing little more than shapes and shadows. The curtains were thick and heavy, holding off the moon and trapping the dark midnight within the confines of the lost room. Even the dawn's quiet light and morning sun would be nothing against the prison of the blackout shrouds blocking the windows and smothering the bed. There was no sound. They did not whisper. They did not seem even to be asleep. Closing the door, Andrew crossed the room, stepping slowly, stepping carefully, listening for the moan and creak of each foot as it touched against the carpeted floor.

The ladies had said he would be first without any word or advice on how such a thing might come to pass. Monsters bred. Creatures grew. People conspired. Douglas hid behind his walls while good people died. They said he would be first. They said he would make things better. People would turn away. People would fear him. Nicholas had not moved. Stabbing. Stabbing. Trembling. Nicholas had not moved.

Maribeth sighed in her sleep almost as if she had been holding her breath. The thing had not feared them. Grabbing Nicholas. Pulling him to the floor. Screaming. Crying. Growling. Roaring. Stabbing. Stabbing. The dagger in his hand. The knife in Andrew's hand. Stabbing. Sighing. Stabbing. Douglas first. Sighing. Grunting. Never opening his eyes. Lost in the dark. Stabbing the blankets. Stabbing the dark. Maribeth crying like a lost child. Eyes open. Pulling away. Bunching the covers all together between her fists. Saying nothing. As if her voice was lost. Pulling away as if trapped in a dream. All but paralyzed. Unable to speak. Unable to scream. Trembling eyes like twin full moons.

Andrew crawling. Climbing across the bed. Covers clawing at him. Dragging at his hands. Feet. Legs. Maribeth holding the blanket to her chin like a shield. Eyes like saucers. No voice. Noise like a moan. Like a dream cry starting in the pit of for-

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ever but never rising to the level of words. Not even a whisper. Barely a sound. Dagger in his hand. Stabbing. Clawing. Gurgling. Stabbing. Holding the blankets tight to her chest and chin as if she could not move. Eyes like pouched eggs with runny yokes. Stabbing. Slashing with the knife. Cutting blankets. Sheets. Covers. Stabbing and stabbing and stabbing. And, Nicholas had not moved. The creature had lain still. And, Nicholas had not moved.

Looking from one to the other. They did not move. Sprawled on the bed. They did not move. Maribeth's eyes were open. Facing him. But, they did not watch him. Douglas did not move. Among the covers. Twisted between the dark, damp and ruptured sheets. Douglas could not move. He could never breathe again. Andrew pushed the knife into him. Again. Again and again. Stabbing. Stabbing. Pushing it up to the hilt. Dragging it back. Slowly. As if caught. Again and again. Stabbing. Stabbing. Until he could not see.



Andrew sat on the bed, trying to breathe. Trembling. Holding the dagger loose in one hand. A sigh exploded from him as if he were drowning. Fire raced his spine. Arched his back. Twisted him like a pretzel. And, he tried not to scream.



Beth found him sitting on the edge of the bed back in their room. The knife held loose in his hands. Covered in blood. He was head to foot smeared and damp with blood as if he had been drenched with ink.

"It is done," she said, crossing to him. Gasping. "My God, it is done."

He sat without looking as if he didn't even know she was there.

"Look at you. My God, it is done." Reaching for him. Trembling. Touching him. "You're cold. My God, so much blood."

He sat as if alone in the room. The knife all but falling from between his fingers. She stroked his arm. Fingers brushing quickly as if trying to warm him. Ignored.

"Let's get you cleaned up." Brushing down his arm. Finding

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his hand. "Warm." Slippery. Damp. "Come on. Get up." Grasping his fingers. "Get up, Andrew."

She pulled as if lifting. He followed. Docile. Compliant. Leading him toward the bathroom.

"Such a mess. How did you manage. Never think about such things. My God, such a mess. Who would have thought?" Dropped the knife into the sink. "Worry about that later. Get you cleaned up. Not that it matters, I guess. Nothing to hide. But, appearances to think about."

Began to pull at his pajamas. Ripping them. Throwing them to the floor. Looking at her hands.

"My God, so much blood." Fought with his pants. "That's good. One foot. Now, the other." Let her robe fall.

Pulled him into the shower. Started the water. Letting it flow hot. Surround them with steam. Held him under the stream.

"Get it off. Get it all off. Wash it away." Rubbed him. Scrubbed him with the soap. "The housekeeper," she said, spreading suds. "My God, I almost forgot. The housekeeper. Settled for a hand-job. Can you believe it?"

Turned him around under the spray. Rinsing soap away.

"There I was pretending to be a bored spoiled housewife. Looking for a bit of a thrill. Bored by it all the same. Ready to do whatever it took to keep him distracted. And, he settled for a little bit of nothing."

She laughed, running her hands over him.

"Really, what is this?" Made a gesture. Reached around him. Reached down. "Shall I demonstrate? Would you like the same?" Began to stroke. "Bit of kneading? Raise that dough?"

"No." Pulled away from her.

"What?"

Water falling all around them.

"I'm sorry. Not like that. Not like."

"Like? What?"

"Sorry." Grabbed her. Held her tight. Water raining down all around them.

She stood. Rigid. Water flowing. Skin to skin. Let her arms drift. Sweep around him. Hold him. Squeeze him. He shivered as

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if he might fall. She wrapped her arms even more tightly around him. Stood in the warm fog and rain.

"So sorry," he said, mumbling. "So sorry."

"It's all right." Holding him tight. "Everything will be all right. All for the best. Everything. All for the best."

He reached around her. Turned off the water. They stood. Dripping. Letting the mist drift. Grow cold. Fade away. They tow-eled themselves off, looking at their soiled clothes. Beth went to the sink. Began washing the knife.

"Doesn't matter," he said, moving to stand beside her. Touching. Resting their shoulders together. "Police will never be involved."

She left the knife in the sink. They wandered back to the bed. Crawled under the covers without bothering with pajamas. Nightgowns. Lying in bed together. Holding. Touching. Letting fingers drift over arms. Shoulders. Faces. Chest. Kissing like children. Slowly at first. Chaste. Holding. Stroking. Entwining feet and arms. Slowly more urgently. As if without plan. Urgency. Desperation. Passion. As if the world was burning all around them. Kissing. Kissing. Touching. Stroking. Falling together. As if for the last time. As if the world was about to die.



They sat at one end of the table, watching him. Pale faces as if it was their blood that had been used to stain the sheets and soak the bed. Old table of polished wood. They had eaten off of it only the night before. Now, they sat huddled around one end. As far from the kitchen door as they could reach. Andrew sat facing them. His arms and elbows resting on the table as if pressing it to the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking past them at the wall. "What did you say your names were again?"

"We could sit here going round and round," one of them said. Dark hair. Thin face grown soft. Glasses. Frightened eyes.

"And, I still wouldn't know who you were. Much less remember."

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"We could still involve the police," another one said. Graying, unshaven whiskers. Big ears. Big nose. Bloodshot eyes.

"Oh, do that," Andrew said. "Let's bring those idiots into it. Mucking about in our affairs. The press following after. Is that what you want? Secret society exposed? How long before the first one called us quacks?"

"As if we could stop them."

"Which is exactly what we will do. As I said, we release a statement. Tragic passing. Sudden stroke. Heart attack. Wife in mourning. Seclusion."

"Think they'll believe that?"

"We've never cooperated with the police before, and we're not about to start. You." Pointed at the graying unshaven beard. "Matthew. Malcolm. Whatever you said your name was."

"Marcus."

"Said you were a doctor, yes? Know people around here? Can attest to cause of death?"

"Yes."

"Then, you'll prepare the proper paperwork. Death certificate."

"I've never falsified a certificate before."

"Never?"

"Never."

Andrew watched him as if he expected at any moment to burst out laughing.

"Given the things we do?" Andrew said. "Our calling?"

"Never had to explain away a man's death at the hands of his fellow man before."

"It's much the same thing, I'm sure."

"They were monsters."

"If thinking so will make you happy."

"You're still assuming we will do what you ask," the thin man said behind his glasses.

Andrew studied his face. Slowly. As if memorizing every angle and jagged edge.

"It's Alex. Arthur. Andrew. Arthur, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Arthur," he said as if gathering his thoughts from the depths

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of time. "We are a very old company, and our ways are sacred to us. Handed down by God himself."

"God did not intend us to murder each other in our beds."

"He did, in fact."

"Do not jest. Do not mock us. Our ways are old as time, and you will respect them."

"I honor them."

"Then how can you sit there-"

"Douglas did not honor our ways."

They watched him as if he was mad.

"Douglas took people out of the field." Returned their looks with unblinking eyes. "Surrounded himself with consultants and researchers. Starved the field teams. Let the darkness grow."

"What are we without knowledge?" Another one. Balding. Pudgy fingers. No longer thin.

"Knowledge from the field."

"We cannot forsake the past." Desperate eyes. "Field reports. Research. Quantified. Yields perspective."

"How many incursions in the last six months?"

Silence.

"Reports? Sightings? Mystery circles? How many?" They watched him. "Six, at least. And, we don't even know if it is a swarm."

"Maybe, it is you who lacks perspective."

"Oh, yes. Let's go there." Andrew moving as if he would walk around the table. "Kept us ignorant. How does withholding information from the field teams, the intercept teams, help us?"

"Nobody withheld."

"Then why didn't we know?" Slumping in his chair. "Perspective indeed."

"Doesn't justify," Marcus said. Eyes locked on the table as if he could not move. "Nothing justifies what you did."

"Believe what you will. Depraved desperation, if it makes you happy." He looked at them, rising slowly. Pressing his fists into the wood. "I am still first."

They said nothing. Looked at nothing. Floor. Table. Chairs. Ceiling. Anywhere but each other.

"Matthew. Marcus. Yes, you there. Will prepare the cause of

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death. Handle the paperwork. The police will not be involved." Andrew watched him blink. Nod his head as if he had been startled. "I'll leave you, I think. Give you time to talk amongst yourselves. But not by much."



"He's mad."

"Monstrous."

"What do we do?"

"We cannot go to the police."

"We must."

"No, he's right. We've never gone to the police."

"Then, what do we do?"

"Ascension through assassination."

"No."

"Monstrous."

"Stabbed in the back. In his sleep. No chance to defend himself."

"I do not think that the bylaws specify."

"They never considered."

"We don't have to accept."

"Is it wise to stand against him?"

"What?"

"Ascension through assassination."

"Meaning we should kill him?"

"Meaning he could turn on any one of us."

"Then, we stand together."

"Maribeth, too. Why Maribeth?"

"Then, which of us would be first?"

"Ascension through assassination."

"Well, which one of us will it be? How long before we turn upon each other?"

"Let's not be rash."

"Time to consider. Time to plan."

"Consider. Wait and see."

"Learn what others think. As the news spreads."

"Yes, for now."

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"We let him be first."

"For now."

"Wait for the others to yield or rage."

"Gather. Consider. Alliances."

"He may even turn out to be good at it."

"After what he's done?"

"He doesn't have to be first for long."

"Wait and see."

"Yes, wait and see."



"Well?"

"Cowards, the lot of them."

"They'll accept you?"

"None will stand against me. They have no choice."

"Ascension through assassination."

"Yes."

"We've won."

"For now."

"Never have to go into the field."

"For now."



"Henry."

"Mr. Carver."

"Not Mr. Peacock?"

"No. It's not. What. You're name."

"I liked Mr. Peacock. Flamenco dancer."

"It's not your name. Didn't seem right."

"We're all friends here, Henry."

"Didn't seem appropriate. I don't. Know."

"Flamenco dancers are fiery. High spirited. Impetuous."

"Rash."

"That's the spirit! Is that what I am? Rash?" Turned the corner of the table. Walking toward Henry. "I suppose I am rash. Prone to speaking my mind. Acting on impulse. Doing what needs done."

"I suppose. One way of looking at it."

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"What have you got there?"

"Huh?"

"What are you looking at? Reviewing?"

"Oh, this." Henry touched the book spread on the table before him. Standing over it as if it was supporting him. "I'm just." Flipped pages almost at random. "Looking."

"Well, you've found something. Any given page is a discovery." He stood next to Henry. "Anything good?"

"I don't." Rested his hand flat. "Was looking for the bylaws. I needed. Confirmation. Justification."

"Ascension through assassination."

"I suppose."

"It's in there."

"I know."

"But, you just wanted to read the words for yourself. With thine own eyes."

"I don't know."

"We were heading down the wrong path, Henry."

"I suppose."

"Something needed doing. You had withdrawn your support, Henry. Standing on the brink. I didn't know what else to do."

"I didn't know."

"How desperate the situation?"

"How much you wanted it."

"Have you spoken with Paul?"

"Briefly. Only in passing."

"He still won't speak with me."

"I know. I'm. Give it time."

"If we had time, Douglas would still be alive."

"So sudden. So much to take in."

"At least you're speaking to me."

"Well whatever would you have me do?"

"Speak your mind."

"I don't."

"I'm not going to kill you, Henry."

"What a thing to say."

"Ascension through assassination only goes one way."

"Then how do you protect yourself from those beneath you?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"With the people beneath them. Seeking ascension. Or rather they protect themselves. They protect me by protecting themselves. Until something gives. Turkeys suffocating the center."

"We're turkeys now?"

"We've always been turkeys, Henry. I've just moved to the center."

"That's not what."

"Yes?"

"Another day. Another conversation. We didn't want to be turkeys scared of thunder. Frightened of rain."

"Looking up."

"Oh?"

"Turkeys don't crush the center in the rain. They look up."

"Do they?"

"They look up. Wondering about the rain. And, they drown. Raindrops hitting them in the face."

"Well, let's try to do a better job than turkeys drowning in the rain."

"Looking up, what will we see?" Held his hand, looking to the ceiling, as if shielding his eyes from the sky.

"I don't know."

"Well, let's try not to drown while trying to find out."



"You should speak to him."

"He killed them."

"So quit."

"Stabbed them. Again and again and again."

"Abandon your calling."

"You make it sound so easy."

"The calling haunts me. Like a faded memory. Echo of a half-remembered song."

"I still see that thing shuffling through the woods."

"I feel the ax in my hands. Smoke burning my eyes."

"My arm still itches."

"You'd think we would be used to it."

"Never stops. No matter how hard I scratch."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"You should speak to him."

"Itches like a motherfucker."

"Such language."

"Try it sometime."

"It's not our way."

"Nor is supporting murderers."

"Ascension through assassination."

"He stabbed them. Again and again and again. In their bed. As they slept."

"No."

"In their bed. Did they go to sleep knowing they would never wake? What did they say to each other? Goodnight? Farewell?"

"There's protocol."

"Try it sometime. Turn to Rebecca. Say goodbye."

"The calling."

"This has nothing to do with the calling. Leaving on an intercept. Saying goodbye."

"We know the risks."

"In our beds? Surrounded by friends? Family? Try saying farewell tonight."

"How could you know?"

"I asked."

"Marcus or Arthur would say. Never keep such a secret. That there was no duel."

"Not them."

"Who then?"

"Cowards, the lot of them."

"Who is left? Never keep such a secret."

"There is always a way to divine the truth."

"The ladies? You asked the ladies?"

"It's within my purview."

"My God!"

"In their sleep. Again and again and again."

"Challenge him."

"I cannot."

"It's only fitting."

"No."

"Right and proper."

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"I do not want to be first. Not like this."

"How then?"

"Not like this."

"Why did you ask the ladies?"

"I had to know."

"Wretched and deceitful. Why did you ask them?"

"Do not call the truth wretched. Their words deceitful."

"How could he keep the secret?"

"Cowards, as I said."

"It cannot hold."

"Turmoil."

"So speak to him."

"I cannot."

"The story will spread. Rumors may fly. Lies may race the sky.

But, the truth will follow."

"The company will fracture."

"Why we must stand with him."

"No."

"Murder or no."

"In their beds."

"The company must stand."

"Dreaming of morning."

"Our calling. The company must stand."

"It itches."

"Ascension through assassination. The company must not crack."

"I did not swing the hammer."

"Cowardice has weakened us when we must be most strong.

The company must not splinter and fall."

"Weakened us."

"We must be strong."

"Conspiracy for you, too?"

"What?"

"Revelation. Millennium cult."

"I don't. I don't know."

"My arm won't stop itching."



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The reports came from all over, scattered across the table as if to show that they had been gathered from the far reaches of the country. Distant corners like distant lands. Drifts and shadows. Forgotten piles. Andrew dictating. Leaning against the table's edge. Letting it hold him. Hands braced. Looking over the papers. Field reports. Sightings investigated. Incursions explored. Rumors squashed. Dogs lost. Alarms verified. Patterns in the night.

He stopped when he saw Paul, letting his voice fade. Jonathan did not move. Eyes on Paul. Notepad held still. Pen poised. Waiting. Paul drifted slowly toward them, looking to the paintings and portraits scrawled across the walls. The serious men watching them from the depths of time. Andrew waved his fingers as if brushing dust from his sleeve, and Jonathan left them, disappearing through a side door. The panel sliding closed on a whisper and soft click almost as if it was a secret passageway.

"No time to take notes," Andrew said, raising his hands, gesturing at the table. "I must rely on an assistant's shorthand skills." Paul watched him, moving slowly. Eyes drifting as if they could not hold still. "It's so much, and I haven't even tried to make changes yet. Well, a few. We're investigating body armor. Bulletproof vests, basically. Worn under the clothes. Should make Henry happy. Don't know how to protect the arms and the face. But, still. We're looking into it."

"What did they tell you?" Paul held his arms at his sides. Hands raised every so slightly. Fingers spread. As if he might hold the world down.

"I don't." Shook his head.

"The ladies Katherine. What did they say?"

"That I would die if I went to Hatfield. Unless I went to Hatfield."

"No."

"They didn't know if there was a connection. Wouldn't tell me, anyway."

"No, you know."

"What?"

"They said I would be first." Leaning toward Andrew as if he were whispering.

"No, you said that you're descendents would be first."

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"Someone like you." Fingers curled on the table.

"Something like that."

Paul staggered back as if shoved.

"I should say exactly like that," Andrew said.

"No."

"Something had to be done. We were in agreement."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Douglas was a problem."

"You wouldn't go so far based on something I said. You wouldn't trust the ladies like that."

"Why not?"

"You think I'm the only one they spoken to? Made predictions?"

"They said I would die in Hatfield."

"That's not all they said, is it?"

"They say many things. Not all are predictions."

"They said you would be first," Paul said. Hands clenched.

"Did they? Well, how about that."

"Don't."

"They were right, weren't they?"

"Don't twist."

"Yes?"

"It's not right."

"What?"

"Thou shall not kill."

"Except when we do."

"It's wrong."

"Ascension through assassination. In our bylaws and everything."

"I don't care."

"Well, I do."

Paul said nothing, looking to the table. Eyes locked to its surface as if hiding among the twists and piles of paper spread across its surface.

"Lots and lots of people care," Andrew said. "Far more than you." He took a step toward Paul. "They approve."

"Your cowards and sycophants now."

"Are they?"

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"Frightened turkeys crushing you."

"So, Henry is a coward now? I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that."

"Henry wants to preserve the company."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that you do not."

"At what cost?"

"Now, who's the coward?"

"What?"

"Preserving the status quo."

"I never said."

"At any cost."

"That's not what I said."

"Always telling me to conform. Stay in Douglas' good graces."

"Well, I didn't think the alternative was to kill him."

"Now, you're just saying the first thing that comes to mind."

Andrew turned to the table. "We were right about one thing. Douglas was keeping secrets." Glance over his shoulder. Back to the table. "There's quite a nest out there that we've been ignoring. Left to fester and rot. Resources. Well, I won't have it. Going to burn it out. Lead the expedition myself."

"No coward, you."

"That's right." Turning on Paul. "No coward, I. Smothered by turkeys." Stepping toward him. "I will set an example. Going to leave as soon as we're ready."

"Quite an example."

"You know there's supposed to be this big party. Celebration. Coronation. Whatever."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm having it delayed. The expedition is more important."

"Yes, quite the example."

"Exactly." Andrew turned, pacing the table, looking to books and papers. Portraits of serious men with serious faces. "You know what would be an even better example." Facing away. "If you came on the expedition."

"No." Whispered. "I'm sorry. No, I cannot."

"I'm sorry, too." Whispered to the serious faces watching them from the wall.



Beth leaned against the door as if the solid weight of it against her skin was the only thing stopping her from shaking. As if she should be running. The need for motion leaving her shaken and shivering. Only the door holding her still. Holding her enthralled so that her hand wasn't glued to the buzzer. The doorbell having made not a sound when she had touched it almost as if it had not existed. As if people did not live. Empty hallway. Silent. No trace of scent or fragrance almost as if there wasn't even any air to fill the void. It was all she could do not to press the buzzer again, wondering if it was a test. Patience. Sanity. Wondering if people doubted there had been a signal at all. Curious if anything moved beyond. Reaching for the bell. Hand wavering. Fingers shaking. Stretching.

A click beyond. Without moving, the door growing light. She jumped back, brushing a hand down her blouse. Rushing. As if to straighten. Hide wrinkles. The door opening. A young woman stood within. Dark eyes. Dark hair to her shoulders. Slender. Simple robe. Almost a dress. Off-white. Cream. A smile mostly in the eyes. Touching the corners of her lips. The door opening wide.

"Come."

Beth stepped slowly as if not trusting her feet. Trembling. Hoping it did not show. Moving to stand next to the young woman. Reminding her of a freshman college student. She saw so many at the conservatory. The entryway was earth-tones and old wood. Comforting. Inviting. Scent of freshly baked bread on the air. She listened to the door close behind her. Turned. Looking to the young woman.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Carver?" Hands spread. Opening. Inviting. Sleeves slipping.

"I don't," Beth said, turning. Wanting to look anywhere but facing nowhere. "I don't know the procedure."

"Would you like to rest? Refresh yourself?"

"Yes, I suppose. I don't."

"Quite all right." The young woman turned. "Follow."

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Beth trailed behind her down a short hallway. Paintings. Tapestries on the walls.

"I didn't make an appointment," she said. "Ask permission. Nobody knows I'm here."

"That's quite all right. We act as our own gatekeeper. People can give all the permission they like outside, but we still decide if they can be invited in."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

They stood in a bedroom like part of a small apartment all to itself within the larger suite of rooms. Narrow bed with robes so much like the young woman's spread across the covers. Sitting room. Kitchen. Somewhere behind them. Sliding door left open enough to show a bathroom beyond.

"Rest. Refresh yourself," the young woman said.

"Thank you." Walking to the edge of the bed. Hand drifting. Fingers brushing the robe.

"If you need anything."

"Yes, thank you. I still don't." Looking about the room as if seeking secrets in the walls. "Is your name Katherine?"

"If you like."

Beth tried to smile. Laugh.

"If I don't like?"

"Helen, perhaps?"

"Perhaps?"

"But not Cassandra."

"No?"

"Oh, God no. Please."

"A bit much?"

"Just."

"Well, let's keep our options open."

"No need to rush into things."

"True."

"Rest. Refresh yourself."

"Yes, you said that."

"I will return when you are ready."

"Please, I don't know."

"When you are ready, I will know."

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"What do I do?"

"Anything you like. There is coffee. Tea. If you do not wish to bathe. I can prepare it for you."

"No, thank you."

"When you are ready then." The young woman bowed ever so slightly, clasping her hands together. Turned. Left.

Beth looked back to the room, feeling her face burn as if fire swept around her like a swirling breeze. Felt it in her eyes. Wondering if there were tears. Finding nothing. She stepped to the bed. Feeling the robes. Lifting them. Studying them with her eyes. She changed into them. Soft. Silk. Unable to bring herself to bathe. Lay upon the bed. Flat. Arms. Legs. Spread wide. Staring at the ceiling.

She sat up slowly raising herself on her elbows as if she had been asleep or else lost to the void. Turned her head. Eyes drifting across the wall. The young woman was standing in the doorway, watching her.

"Helen, is that your name?"

"If you like."

"What do you call each other?"

"Hey, you."

"Seriously."

"Filthy whore."

"I doubt that."

"Dirty slut?"

"There's no call for that."

"It's what you call us."

"I don't, actually."

"I meant the royal you."

"Doesn't mean what you think it does unless you still mean me."

"Humanity in general then."

"I fear you have developed that reputation."

"Yes, fear does that."

"What?"

"Develop a reputation. Of what people fear."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Funny thing. We don't come to them."

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Beth covered her face, feeling smoke and flames behind her eyes. Brushing one hand across them. Breath catching in her throat. Choking back a cry like an explosion pressing at her chest.

"It's okay," Helen said, touching her shoulder with one slender hand. "You have questions. We need each other."

"Yes," she managed to say.

"Follow."

Helen took her by the arm, guiding her. She did not see the hallway or the path they followed only noticing the room around them when they reached it. Another woman standing there. Short hair. Dirty blond. Freckles.

"Mrs. Carver," the woman said, moving toward her. "Please, sit."

"Beth," she said, sinking to the couch. Soft. Deep. Comfortable.

"Beth, then. You may call me Kate. Or, Helen, if you prefer."

"No, please." Looking to the two women. "I don't want to play that game."

"If you wish," Kate said, sitting next to her.

"I don't. I don't." Covering her face with her hands. Grasping her mouth as if all her words would spill forth. Stain the robes. The couch. Splash across the floor.

"In your own time. Do you need anything? Water? Tea?"

"Thank you. Water, I suppose. I don't."

"Of course. Nothing to it."

The young woman, Helen, left the room.

"I'm sorry. I don't know the protocol."

"Quite all right."

"Procedure."

"Nothing to it."

"But, I have to know. I have to."

"Of course."

"Will Andrew be okay?"

"Ah," Kate said, leaning back. Eyes drifting over her. "That's rather a vague question."

Beth laughed. Like an explosion. Giggling. Cackling. Hands to her face as if she would dig her fingers into her teeth. Heart

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pounding. Feeling it push against her throat. As if she would choke on it.

"I thought that was rather the point."

"A great general once wanted to know what would happen if he went to war."

"Wait, I know this one." Holding herself tight. "An empire will fall."

"That's what being vague gets you." Kate turned, looking. Accepted a glass from Helen. Held it out to Beth.

"I should know the name." Accepting the glass. Watching the liquid. Tasting water. Cool on her lips. Soothing her throat.

"As should I."

"Yes. I suppose I should try to be more specific then. Andrew risks." Holding the glass tight in her hands. Looking at it as if it was a crystal ball. "Far more than others. Far too much." Holding the glass. "I wanted him to stop. Let others go into the field. To be safe." Water trembling. "I encouraged him to rise in the company. So that he wouldn't always be in the field. Wouldn't be at such risk." Watching the glass. "But, he's gone back into the field. Left this morning. To prove he isn't a coward."

"Your hopes. Backfiring, so to speak."

"I want to know." Trembling. "Will he be safe? Will he return from this expedition? Will I see him in the morning?"

"I'm guessing you don't actually mean tomorrow morning." Kate took the glass from her. Passed it to Helen. "Will he return alive. Sane. Whole."

"Yes."

Kate looked to Helen. Eyes lingering. The young woman standing. Quietly holding the water glass.

"We actually do better with the vague ones." Trace of a smile. "An empire will fall."

"Sorry."

"Not at all." Stood. Flowing to her feet. "We always try to pinpoint specifics. Help the company." Put the back of one hand dramatically to her forehead. "I sense great danger." Shrugged. "Not so helpful."

"Fortune cookie."

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"When was the last time that happened?" Looked about the room. "Not as if it was the crack of dawn."

"And yet, I'm always here before you."

"You leave earlier, too. Symmetry. Balance. One of those."

"Yes."

"You should be happy, Rebecca. It's going to be a glorious day." Sat. Put on her glasses. "Andrew and Henry will be fine. Conquering heroes and all of that."

"So you say."

"Oh, I do. I do." Placed a book on Rebecca's end of the desk. "Here. We'll need this later."

"Is this the Ptchyl manuscript? It's been misplaced for months. How did you find?"

"Well, funny that. I just had a feeling that somebody would ask for it today, sending us on a wild-goose chase for hours, of course, and I knew. I just knew where I would find it."

"So you went right to it?"

"Yes, last place I would have thought to look. Went right to it. And, there it was."

"That's amazing luck."

"I told you. It's going to be a glorious day."



"Emma's still not speaking to me."

"Oh?"

"It's on account of everything." Whispering. "All the nonsense. Like I had a hand in that."

"To be fair, it was unexpected."

"Oh, I suppose. Not unheard of. But, not. Who fights a duel in this day and age? Grown men. Honestly?"

"Hard to imagine."

"And, I was there."

"Douglas just walked right up to your husband?"

"Oh, nothing so formal."

"So, Andrew started it?"

"I don't recall who did what. It's all a blur."

"But, surely."

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"Grown men fighting. What was I to think? It's bad enough when they go out into the field."

"Yes."

"But, to see. Right in front of you. Everything just got out of hand. I don't want to think about it."

"It must have been terrible."

"Oh, it was."

"I'm sorry."

"Poor Maribeth. In seclusion. I don't know what she'll do."

"I can't imagine."

"If anything happened to Andrew." Reaching for Rebecca. "Henry." Let her hand fall. "I don't know what I would do."

"Terrible."

"Emma not speaking to me. Like she's afraid of me. As if I could have her killed."

"That's just. People don't know how to react."

"Why I'm grateful. You speaking to me."

"Oh."

"I know we've had our differences. But. I know we'll get past this. Henry and Andrew will be fine."

"You're confidence is infectious. I wish I had more of your strength."

"Well, look who I married. Troublemaker. You need a thick skin."

"Look what being a troublemaker has gotten him."

"Not what I would have wanted." Whispering. "No." Choked off. "If only Emma would speak to me."

"Give her time."

"I don't want to be feared."

"Give her time."



They had taken two cars. Driving long hours. Taking turns behind the wheel. The six of them. More than half the country behind them. Andrew in one car. Henry in the other. Jason and David with Andrew. Patrick and Jonathan with Henry. Trading places as

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needed. Resting as necessary. Stopping at small motels. Parking in the back.

Stopping at long last before what had once been an office building. Long abandoned. Lost in the wilderness. Overgrown. Far from anything. The town having shrunk away as if it had withered like an old tree. Decaying. Falling away. Turning brown and black. Roads all but forgotten. Aging. Broken. Weeds growing in the cracks like wildfire.

They climbed out of the cars. Having done little to pull off the road almost as if there was no point. They stood, moving slowly. Saying nothing. Stretching. Listening to insects like hidden voices. Murmuring. Humming to each other. Insistently. Monotone. Almost like chatter. Nonsense. Repetitive. Loud. Immune to the growl of cars as they had approached. Ignoring the soft crunch of gravel now underfoot. Murmuring voices didn't care. Almost as if they were incapable of noticing. Reacting.

They stood, watching each other. Henry and Andrew exchanging glances. Looking over the others. Eyes mostly to the rotting road beneath their feet. Andrew crossed to the back of his car. Station-wagon. Opening the back. Henry helping him pull out large boxes. Like equipment cases. Transporting gear to a concert. Lowering the cases to the ground. Carefully. Opening one. Checking the contents. Jonathan and Jacob going to the second car. Removing more boxes. Slowly. Carefully.

David. Watching. Patrick. Doing nothing. As if the earth pulled at them. Eyes following boxes. Patrick looking up. Studying the fence. Old. Falling over. Chain-link. Brush and weeds having long ago entwined with the links like greedy lovers. Bending. Pulling it down. Patrick moving as if following a path. Where the road touched the fence. Where once the drive had led right up to the edge of the building.

Patrick began pulling at a fence post. Already leaning. Links barely clinging. Pulling the post this way and that almost absent-mindedly. As if he wasn't really paying attention. Mind wandering. Going through the motions like a sleepwalker. Automaton. Listening to the insects murmur and screech with their monotonous voices.

Andrew and Henry moving boxes closer to Patrick. Andrew

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stopping. Watching him. Finally stepping forward. Touching Patrick's arm. Waiting for the other man to notice. Stop pulling at the post. Half out of the ground. They left the post. Went back to the car. Found bolt cutters. Patrick took them back to the fence. Andrew moved to David. Shoved him in Patrick's direction. David moving. Startled in slow-motion. Went to Patrick's side. Held the fence as Patrick cut the links. Rolling the fence. Moving it sideways. Leaving a gap for the boxes. Wide enough to drive the cars to the very edge of the factory if they had chosen.

Moving the boxes in stages. Leapfrog. Walking through brush and tall grass. Gray. Old. Dry. Rustling. Whispering. The insects murmuring. Nonstop. Loud as anything they had ever heard. As if the insects must be giants or hidden so many among the blades of grass as to be an army. Noticing them not at all.

Stacking the boxes near the wall. Near the front door of the building. Jason walking back toward the cars. Slowly drifting to a stop as if realizing there were no more boxes to collect. Facing the cars. Not moving. Monotone screeching and screaming all around him. Swaying. Slow step toward the cars almost as if he had tripped over a stone; even though, he had not moved. The voices chattering. Chanting.

Andrew watching him. Walking to Jason's side. Watching him. Not speaking. Not touching. Finally reaching out as if Jason was a live wire. Send him flying. Jason turning as if startled. As if the world had been empty and nobody should have been standing there. They watched each other. Jason finally shook his head as if trying to dislodge a fly. Looked back to the cars without moving. Andrew patting him on the shoulder. Leaving him. Walking back to the others. Surrounding the boxes. Releasing clasps and fasteners. Standing around as if they didn't know what to do.

Henry watching Andrew approach. Looked to where Jason yet stood. Back to Andrew. Turned to the boxes and crates. Rum-maged among them. Found a hammer. Rawhide gloves. Crowbar. Put on the gloves. Holding them up. Looking at them. Showing them off to Andrew. Touching the sleeve of his suit-coat. Holding it for inspection. Andrew shook his head slowly. As if he might smile. Turned to the boxes. Found gloves. Put them on.

Followed Henry up the steps to the door. Listening to Patrick

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and David rustling among the boxes behind him. Henry held the crowbar in one hand before the door. Old. Decrepit. Rusted. Padlock. Looked to Andrew. Held a crucifix in one hand. Like a shield. Mallet in his other at his side. Henry forced the door. Stepped back. Andrew stood, holding the cross as others might hold a gun. Kicked the door.

Darkness within. Musty air billowing outward as if the room had been holding its breath. Voices never changing. Muttering. Chanting. Uncaring. Nothing happened. They stood. Watching. Looking. Listening. Nothing happened.

Andrew stepped forward. Still holding the crucifix. Looked into the room. Crossed the threshold. Stood within. Henry following slowly. Patrick holding a flashlight. Sweeping the room. Dusty. Dirty. Cobwebs everywhere as if the room had been draped with flimsy sheets. Freestanding. Billowing slowly to the rhythms of the dark.

David had a carton of salt. Began to spread a wide semicircle in the room. Jonathan carrying a jug like a small beer keg. Leaving it at the center of the semicircle. Going back. The others standing around. Returning with another keg. Placing it next to the first. A box followed. Overflowing with wires. Patrick began wiring the kegs together as if setting up jumper cables on a car. David completed the circle, leaving only enough of a gap for the wires. They left, stringing cable out behind them. Andrew and Henry were the last to leave, watching the room as if children were hiding behind every surface. Playing hide and seek. Waiting for just the right moment to jump out. Scream.

Jason had taken several more steps toward the cars. They returned to the boxes. Walked two of them around the building. Repeated the process of entering. Insects never caring. Never voicing surprise. Annoyance. The slightest trace of awareness.

Another dusty room. Cobwebs. Shadows. Breathing. Billowing. Swaying. As they worked. Set up kegs. Left boxes. Strung together with wires. Trailing behind them as they abandoned the building. Made their way back around. Stringing wire like Hansel and Gretel as if they might need to find their way.

They returned to the cars, passing Jason. Startled to find them around him. He walked with them. Helped move the surviving

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boxes away. Toward the cars. Cable and wire strung back to the building. Stretching inside. David had the trigger together. Wires gathering to it. Gave the trigger to Andrew. Holding it. Andrew turned the hand-crank. Like a self-charging radio. Turned the crank fast. Listening to it complain.

They all turned. Watching the building. Andrew pushed the button. Nothing happened. They stood as if frozen. Andrew holding the trigger as if it had shocked him. Checked the wires. Began turning the hand-crank. Faster. Faster. Stopped. Pressed the trigger button. Nothing happened. Began turning the crank. Whining. Complaining. As if in pain. The only sound.

The voices had stopped. The insects were gone. Only sound in Andrew's hands. Suddenly, silence. As if the world had been turned off. The hand-crank making no noise as Andrew turned it. Jason ran. David and Patrick ran. Down the road. As if chased by a train. The factory watching them. The land shivering. Grass quivering. Building breathing as if it was a kneeling giant getting ready to stand.

Andrew pushed the button, and the world exploded. Throwing them back. Flames leaping from the building. Stretching. Springing upward. Bright. White. Almost as if the fire was liquid raining upward.

"Yeah!" Andrew cried. Screaming. Shouting. "Judgment is at hand! I am the bearer of his righteous fury!" He threw the trigger at the ground.

They watched the flames sweep over the building. Amongst the crackle and roar of flame, they heard a mewling sound. Like kittens. Lost. Scared. Alone. Drifting slowly into silence. The insects never returning. Never resuming their convocation.

They turned, looking down the road. Jason was walking down the road. Slowly. Always away from the factory. Patrick and David much farther down as if they had never stopped running. Standing still.

Henry, Andrew and Jonathan returned to the cars. Loaded the boxes back into them. Turned the cars. Began driving after the others. Stopping. Picking them up. They drove away, leaving the burning office building lost behind them.



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"My God!"

Standing beside the cars. Pulled off the side of the road. Far from the old office building. The smoke little more than a smudge against the horizon.

"My God!"

They were still crawling out of the cars. Andrew standing beside the driver's door. Henry quivering next to his car as if he did not know whether he should pace or fall down. Threw back his head and screamed with a roar that tore at the soul.

"We did it," Jonathan said. "I can't believe we did it."

"My God, that was a thing that should not be." Turning. Andrew looking over everyone as they stood shaking. Swaying beside the cars.

"What was that? What?"

"Let it go," Andrew said. "Should not have been allowed to be. Fester. Grow. Douglas' failure. All that matters."

"Gone now," Henry said.

"We did it."

"All that matters." Andrew's hand resting on the open door.

"We did it."

"Burned it from the face of God's green earth."

"We should celebrate."

"We are."

"No, I mean." Jonathan brushed his hands through his hair. Pulling at the roots. "We should celebrate."

"I'm all for that," Henry said.

"Drinking? Dancing?"

"Yes, there must be a town around here somewhere." Turning. Jonathan looking over the road. Fields. Distant trees.

"Girls?"

Stopped spinning.

"I don't know." Looked to the others. "Why not?"

"Some of us are married."

"More for us then."

"Food first, I think," Henry said. "It's still early. Bars. Strip clubs. May have to wait."

"We'll just have to see what we can do." Looking to the others.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"No, we cannot."

"Dissent must be punished."

"Stamped out."

"Forced into the field."

"Yes, exactly. I should know."

"Never stopped you."

"But, they kept hoping. Kept sending me into the night. Hoping that maybe just one more intercept. Just one more time. Silenced, at last."

"Look what happened."

"Yes, exactly. Look what happened."

"Dreadful."

"Damnation." Looking at Paul. Shaken breath. Slow. Trying to stand still. "We can't have it." Almost a whisper. "No matter what. Can't have it."

"Not at all."

"No matter what." All but whispering. "Wrong choices. Wrong answers."

"Burden of responsibility."

"Can't punish people. Can't let them be."

"You'll think of something."

"There's nothing to be done. One way. The other. It's all wrong."

"Douglas muddled along."

"Muddled being the operative word. Doing nothing. Letting it all fall apart. Paralyzed by consequences."

"Muddled along."

"Blind to the alternative."

"Oh?"

"Solidarity."

"Oh."

"Show them we're a united front."

"I know what you meant."

"No reason to doubt. No cracks to find. No purchase for ideas. Why not me."

"I know."

"There's going to be a celebration."

"I know."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Delayed but happening. Celebrate my ascension to first of the company. Friends. Doubters. Everybody."

"I know."

"Unified front."

"Of course."

"It almost didn't happen. Couldn't believe I would put the whole works on hold. Priorities."

"Danger first."

"Well, I couldn't have people thinking I would hide. All of this just so I could hide. Venture into the field nevermore."

"Nobody can call you coward."

"Damn, right."

"Fool, perhaps."

"No, only you would say that."

"Only I wouldn't be punished, anyway."

"Not true."

"Isn't it?"

"Not even close."

"Prove it."

"I can't."

"Well, that's a problem."

"With a path if not a solution."

"That doesn't. Mixing metaphors again."

"I don't care. There's a way."

"There's always. The celebration?"

"Yes."

"The celebration."

"Yes."

Silence. Whispered breath.

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"You heard me." Watching Andrew.

"You're sorry?"

"Yes."

"You're sorry."

"Yes."

"That's a problem."

"Is it?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes, it's a problem. Can't have it. We can't have it."

"We can't?"

"No, we can't."

"I'm unclear on the *we* here."

"What do you mean *we*? Seriously?"

"I'm unclear on how this is our problem."

"You knew enough to say you were sorry."

"That's just. Yeah."

"Yes, our problem."

"I know."

"Can't have it."

"I know."

"Can't have it."

"It's an impasse."

"No, it's not. You're coming to the celebration."

"No."

"You and that pretty wife of yours are coming to the celebration like the good little members of the company that you are."

"No."

"You're going to show the proper respect."

"Respect."

"You're going to put those doubts to rest. End the rumors and speculation. One big happy family. No cause for trouble. No need for dissent."

"I can't."

"You can and you will."

"I'm sorry."

"You will do this as a personal favor to your friend and the head of our order. First of our company."

"You killed him."

"What?"

"Murdered them."

"Never."

"In their bed."

"Not even close."

"Stabbing and stabbing."

"Douglas challenged me!"

"Right."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Witnessed. Fair combat."

"I'm sure."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"What?"

"Who told?"

"Nobody."

"The ladies Katherine?"

"It's not their name."

"The ladies Katherine told you I killed him?"

"No."

"You asked them. You asked them, didn't you?"

"No, I never."

"Never ask them anything."

"That's right. Not a thing."

"But, you know. You just know."

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"Not at all."

"I can't order you. I can't force you. They'll know."

"I know."

"See it in your eyes."

"I know."

"The dissent."

"Sorry."

"The rumors would spread like wildfire."

"Yes, they would."

"Worse than if I forced you to attend."

"Speculation."

"My ass. We know. We both know."

"Yes."

"What am I going to do with you, Paul? What am I going to do?"

"I don't know."

"I need you, Paul. The ladies. I wouldn't. The ladies need you."

"They would survive."

"Don't say such things."

"They always survive."

"Your ideas will survive."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Oh, yes, my ideas."

"Your ideas will win out. You'll survive."

"My ideas."

"You'll never be first."

"Never wanted to be first."

"No?"

"Not like you."

"I never wanted the responsibility."

"Not the same thing."

"You can't separate the title from the responsibility."

"In your mind, you can."

"Nonsense."

"Wishing. Dreaming."

"Rubbish."

"Things would be so much better if only."

"Things don't work like that."

"Doesn't stop us from thinking. Dreaming."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know."

"What am I going to do with you, Paul? I really don't know.

What am I going to do?"

"I don't know."



Andrew and Beth wrapped in sheets. Swirled in blankets. As if the covers had been whipped into a froth. Twisted round and about them. Beth with her arms around Andrew. Holding him. Head on his shoulder. Eyes for the sheets as if they were a puzzle. Drifting moonlight wandering past the window. Peeking through the curtains.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. Beth stroking a hand across his chest. "I just don't know. And, I wish I did. I wish I knew."

"It will all work out, I'm sure." Fingers slipping.

"All work out." Voice drifting.

"It will."

"Pessimist."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"No, the other one."

"Great big pessimist."

"Glass is only half-full, too."

"Overflowing with hot air, anyway."

"Stop."

"Never run out of hot air."

"That's right. No end of hot air." Twisted chest hair between her fingers.

"Ow."

"It'll work out."

"I wish." Fingers brushing together. Entwining. Slipping away from his chest.

"What?"

"Shared your optimism."

"Half-full. Not that hard."

"Nothing to do with hot air. I just don't know what he'll do."

"He's our friend."

"Was."

"Nonsense."

"Was our friend."

"Rubbish."

"He knows."

"Not possible."

"He knows." Eyes drifting. "Never forgive me."

"How?"

"He has sources."

"What?"

"Sources. He has sources."

"No."

"Never sworn to secrecy."

"They wouldn't."

"Care nothing for dissension in the ranks."

"They couldn't."

"Oh, you haven't met them."

"How can you say such?"

"No telling what they might do."

"What are we going to do?" Looking at him.

"I don't know."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

Found the robes laid out on the bed. Silky. Soft. Warm against her skin as if they were fresh from the dryer.

Helen was waiting for her, standing in the doorway as she turned. As she was folding the robe around herself. Feeling its warmth. She followed Helen without a word. Found Kate waiting. The city behind her.

"Elizabeth," Kate said. Arms spread wide. Embracing her. "It's good to see you."

"Thank you," Beth said. Eyes closed. Holding on tight. "For letting me in."

"Of course."

"I didn't. Know. Nobody knows I'm here."

"Nobody needs your permission."

"I know."

"I mean. You don't need."

"I worked it out."

"Well, I hope you plan on telling me."

"Not necessary."

"Anything you need. Anything we can do to help. Just ask."

"Just ask." Looking. Couches. Carpet. Curtains. Window. "I don't. I don't know."

"It's alright. Anything at all."

"The celebration. You know about the celebration?"

"Yes."

"Bringing everyone together."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"His best friend. His strongest supporter. May not be there."

"You wish to know?"

"No. I don't know. Without his support. Always there for him. People will talk."

"Unfortunate."

"You told him." Like an explosion. Wanting to lash out. Push her. Not moving. Falling short. "Why did you tell him?"

"It doesn't exactly work that way."

"You told Andrew he would be first. That was clear enough."

"Yes, I know. We didn't choose. Like we just tripped over him. Oh, look. A baby."

"What?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Paul asked. We didn't know. We saw. We experienced. It's not as if we could choose not to tell him. It was there. Hanging out for all the world to see."

"I don't." Hand to her face. Rubbing her eyes. "That's not much of an improvement."

"You saw. You understand."

Beth looked at her, wanting to close her eyes. Block the sight with her hands.

"I don't understand," she said.

"But, you were there."

"I was." Feeling the world burn.

"Then, you don't understand. Would understand if there was anything to understand."

"Now, you're just stringing words together."

"But, makes as much sense as anything."

"No, not really." Like fire against her skin. Memory tingling like flesh.

"We didn't tell him. We couldn't not show him. Couldn't preview. No seven second delay."

"Cover his eyes." Hand to her face. Scratching. Rubbing. "Blindfold him."

"Yes, exactly."

"But, what should we do? What do we do?"

"Are you asking?"

"I don't know what to do. What should we do?"

"It doesn't work that way."

"So you say."

"It's a dangerous question."

"We don't know what to do. Andrew doesn't know what to do. He's not Douglas. We can't silence him. Take his voice away."

"No," Kate said. "I suppose you could not."

"He's our friend. We can't punish him. What can we do?"

"Should you do?"

"Yes."

"Should you do?"

"Yes, we don't know. We just don't know."

"Are you asking? What are you asking? It's important."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I don't." Looking at Kate. Seeking her eyes. "I don't understand." Kate looking at the floor.

"We don't choose," Kate said. "Offer advice. We only show."

"How does that help me?"

"It doesn't." Shaking her head as if desperate. "We don't help. Not like that. We only show. We don't understand." Looking at Beth. "You have to understand."

"But not what to do."

"What you did. Will do. Understand what you will have done."

"Will have done or may have done?"

"You're asking again. Like probabilities. Doesn't work that way."

"You were almost making sense."

"The tapestry doesn't change as you contemplate what you intend. Seek to understand only what you will have done. Once done, look again."

"Are you deliberately trying to be vague?"

"No."

"Reputation to maintain?"

"Love that reputation. Yes, maintain it, of course."

"Sorry, I didn't."

"Bad as all the rest."

"I'm learning. Trying."

"Yes, you are, I think."

"What can we do?"

"Try to understand what will have happened. What others think. Intend. Embrace the tapestry."

Beth stepped away, shivering as if cold. Brushed at her robes. Off-white. Silk. Shimmering. Warm.

"It's why I'm here," she said. The knot slipping. As if the folds wanted to come apart. Revealing all. "Cleansed myself." Hand to her damp hair. "Prepared."

"Admirable." Wisp of a smile. "Mostly for another purpose. Mostly men. Mostly expectations. Better if they're clean first."

Beth bit at her voice. Catching words before they came free.

"Yes," Kate said. Looking tired. Looking old. Looking disgusted.

"My husband is first. I can work to make things better." Voice

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"What?"

"Not like before. Bickering. Arguing. Not getting on. Patch things up later. He's first, now. No, not like before."

"It's between them."

"People will talk."

"Well, they shouldn't. Between them."

"They will, all the same. Not the same, now. Andrew will have to do something."

"Oh, will he?"

"Oh, yes. People will talk. What will he do? Everybody wants to know. All they can talk about."

"Gossip is for old women and little children."

"You'd like to think so, I'm sure."

"Gobbling like turkeys."

"Yes, very much so."

"What will he do?"

"That's what we all would like to know."

"He can't kill him. He wouldn't."

"We're taking bets."

"Don't think like that."

"You mentioned it first."

"No, he wouldn't. It's in the air. Gobbling of turkeys."

"But, would he? Done it once. Duels don't have to be to the bitter end. Could have shown mercy."

"We don't know what happened."

"No, we don't, do we? Only the gossiping of wild turkeys."

"Details. We don't have the details. How aggressive was Douglas? Did he beg for mercy? Could he?"

"And, the witnesses aren't talking."

"Andrew wouldn't."

"What?"

"I know him. He wouldn't."

"He did."

"No, he wouldn't harm Paul. I know him. He wouldn't."

"Well, that's reassuring."

"He wouldn't."

"But, what will he do?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"What if Paul and Sarah turn up late and there's nowhere for them to sit?"

"Oh, God, we have to leave empty chairs."

"We can't snub them like that."

"Everybody will see."

"We have to tell Andrew."

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"Paul's not here."

"I know."

"Have you seen Andrew's face?"

"Yes."

"Like he's seen a ghost."

• • • • •

"He has to stop looking at those empty chairs."

"I know."

"Drawing everyone's attention."

"I know."

"All they can talk about."

"I know."

"Do something."

"Me?"

"Say something to him."

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"Why wouldn't they show?"

"Paul must know something."

"What? Why wouldn't they show?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine what would be so bad that Paul would stay away."

"Have you seen Andrew's face?"

"Yes, like he's seen a ghost."

"Stupid expression. There's no such thing as ghosts."

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Pyrrhic Kingdom

"What'll he do?"

"I don't know."

"Andrew will have to do something."

"I know."

"Punish Paul."

"I know."



"Didn't show Douglas any mercy."

"No."

"Could have spared him."

"Yes."

"Sent him into exile."

"Yes."

"What'll he do to Paul?"



"Could Paul know?"

"No."

"Why would he stay away?"

"Quiet."

"What he did to Douglas. Maribeth."

"I said, quiet."

"Could be next."

"Shut up."



"Say something to Andrew."

"No."

"What?"

"I can't."

"You must."

"Have you seen his face?"

"You must say something."

"Oh, God, what's he going to do?"

"Get him to stop staring at that chair."

"Oh, God."



"Have you seen Beth?"

"Yes."

"Looks almost as bad as her husband."

"I know."

"Did you talk to her?"

"I can't get near her."



"What is Andrew going to do?"

"I don't know."



He found Henry in the lounge, sitting in his favorite chair, leaning forward, intent on the papers and manuscripts spread before him on the coffee table. Breakfast had been ignored, forgotten, and the morning staff had finally taken the cold and all but untouched tray, leaving only a small cup that had once been warm coffee. Jonathan watched, standing with the staff in their half-hidden alcoves. Henry was alone. Even at this hour, there were always others in the lounge, but not this one morning out of all the others. After the evening and the long night following the celebration, everybody had left as quietly and as quickly as they could. None had wanted to stay, and none had wanted to return with the morning. Henry was alone, oblivious to the staff, and completely unaware that he was watched. Jonathan took a cup from the sideboard and filled it with fresh coffee for no other reason than for something to do, feeling a desire to put off crossing the room and facing Henry. He added milk and sugar, hating both, and considered tossing the cup, holding it with both hands, watching the pale liquid, feeling warmth in his fingers. He took a breath, letting it out like a sigh, turned, and crossed the room to Henry's chair.

"Good morning, Jonathan," Henry said. "You look as if you haven't slept."

"Where is everyone?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Waiting for the hammer to fall, I suppose. Cowards, the lot of them, I say. Any word from his nibs, yet?"

"His?"

"Andrew. Any word from Andrew?"

"He's here, anyway. Not one for talking this morning. And, I know the expression. Nibs."

"Of course you do. It's the usage, I'm sure. Respect the office if not the man and all that rot."

"Not at all." Found a chair facing Henry. Sat. Realized that he had left his coffee on the sideboard. Contemplated going back for it, milk, sugar and all.

"Any word from Paul?" Henry said, watching him.

"About that."

Henry waited.

"I've heard from our contact at the newspaper," Jonathan said.

"Paul is dead."

"What?" Standing.

"Killed. Paul and Sarah. An accident with the taxi on the way here last night."

"No."

"It does happen."

"Details?" Sinking back into his seat.

"Sketchy at best. Another car. Taxi. Smashed into them."

"My God."

"On their way to the celebration."

"Does Andrew know?"

Jonathan shook his head.

"I wanted to talk it over with someone first," he said.

"Better coming from me, you mean?"

"No, I hadn't. I don't know."

"How will he react?" Henry looked over the table. Papers.
"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Do you think?"

"What?"

"Anything to do with it?"

"What?"

"If he didn't think Paul was coming? Do you think he would punish him?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Paul was coming here."

"Would someone sent know that?"

Henry watched him, leaning back in his chair.

"If Andrew did order someone to punish Paul, wouldn't you know about it?"

"No, I don't know. Not necessarily." Jonathan brought his hands to his chin. Rocking slowly. Henry watched him from the distant recesses of his chair.

"Rumors will spread."

"I know," Jonathan said.

"You want me to ask him."

"I don't." Stopped rocking. "I cannot. Know what he'll do. He can. He can replace me."

"Then let us go talk to him."



Andrew was pacing the long table in what had once been Douglas' office. Paintings were the same. Hard-bound volumes and manuscripts still adorned the bookshelves against the walls. Papers were spread across the table as if Andrew had been studying them but simply could not stay still. Henry and Jonathan waited, saying nothing, as if they were invisible. Andrew stopped, turned as if noticing the room for the first time, and returned to the scattered reports on the table.

"Any word?" he said, glancing at them.

"No," Jonathan replied. Andrew's eyes stayed on the pages before him. "I mean, no word from. Yes."

"Paul is dead," Henry said.

"What?"

"Auto accident. On his way to the celebration last night." Watched Andrew's fingers stray for the back of a chair. "This is from Sam at the newspaper so we know the story is legit."

"How?"

"Sam wasn't big on details. Probably still trying to find out himself. Another car crashed into their taxi. Killing them instantly."

"Them?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"We don't know that," Jonathan said.

"They're not dead?"

"No." Looking at Henry. "We don't know if it was instantaneous. We don't know if they suffered." Voice drifting.

"Them?"

"Paul and Sarah, Andrew." Watched him grip the chair. Glanced at Jonathan. "On their way to the celebration."

"Richard?"

"We haven't been able to reach him," Jonathan said.

"How old is he? Six? Seven?"

"He's ten," Henry said.

"No, he can't be."

"Time flies, Andrew."

"We don't even know if they hired a service. If he was with family." Jonathan looked from Henry to Andrew and back again.

"Anything."

"Revelation."

"Yes, it is," Henry said.

"No, revelation. Revelation cult." Looking at him.

"Revelation?"

"Secret society that's got its act together."

"You mean a millennium cult?"

"Don't think of them like that. Easy to dismiss. Why use the other name."

"Revelation."

"We've been tracking them." Throwing up his hands. "Trying to. Picking up the pieces. Following in their wake. Cleaning up their mess."

"Revelation?" Shared a glance with Jonathan.

"You've seen the reports. The rumors, hints and notes. Common patterns. Symbols. Summonings. Working against us."

"Andrew."

"Never listened. Douglas never listened. Working against us. Something had to be done."

"Andrew."

"Now, they've struck."

"Andrew, listen to yourself."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I know how it sounds." Eyes for the table drifting over the papers and reports. "What if I'm not crazy?"

"A secret society determined to bring about the end of the world had Paul and Sarah killed, is that it?"

"And, how would you describe us?"

"Why?"

"Paul is responsible for the ladies. Was responsible."

"We'll need to appoint," Jonathan said. Voice drifting. "You'll need to appoint someone."

"I'll be responsible," Andrew said. "For the short term. Until we know more."

"Until we've unmasked the conspiracy, is that it?"

"Yes, Henry, until we know who is responsible. Working against us."

"Well, I'll just get right on that."

"Yes, you will. We all will. Need to track this."

"Manpower. Spread thin."

"We'll need to work on that." Hand to his forehead. "Yes, which will take manpower. Vicious circle. But, we need more men. So few. We are so few. Recruitment drive."

"Where do we recruit?"

"Where we always recruit," Andrew said, glaring. "Schools. Universities. Bible study. Groups on the occult. Ghost hunters."

"Why not just approach Cryptozoologists while we're at it?"

"I know I'm just rattling off names, but it's a start. I'm not engraved. My words are not locked in stone the moment they exit my mouth."

"Well."

"Not here. Not between us."

"Whatever happened to all the really good secret societies? Secret handshakes. Feeding universities. Thinking they'll change the world. Fertile ground for recruitment." Eyes drifted to Jonathan. "Where did we harvest you from, anyway?"

"Ivy League."

"Wanted to make a difference? Be a part of something bigger than yourself?"

"Something like that."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Not what you expected? Interested in ghost stories? Mysteries of the unexplained? Albinos living in the sewers?"

"Liked a good ghost story. Never took it seriously."

"Now, look at you."

"Yes."

"Good man, Jonathan," Andrew said. "Need more like him. And, Patrick. What's his name. Fairbottom?"

"Fairburrough."

"Yes, good man. Did us proud in Kentucky."

"He ran screaming like a little girl."

"But, he came back." Pointing a finger at Henry.

"True."

"Need more like him. And, David something. Ledger. And, Jason. Never forget Jason."

"Good man. All he's been through."

"Yes, we need to redouble our efforts." Looking from Henry to Jonathan. "Get to the heart of this conspiracy. Root it out before they can kill again."

"Revelation."

"Yes, revelation cult. Working against us. In secret. The storm of incursions in the past six months. Not a coincidence. Paul." Voice drifting as if he had lost his breath. "Paul was starting to see the pattern, too. And, look what happened to him."

"He was a believer?"

"Yes, he told me so. Look what it got him."

"If there's a pattern, they can't hide it from us forever."

"We'll root them out."

"Recruit from the same well as us, I'm sure. Can't keep it a secret."

"Yes, see to it." Tapping the table. "I want a report."



"Not much of an answer."

"Revelation cult?"

"Yes, he's mentioned it before. Interesting evasion."

"So, you think he had a hand in."

"No, I don't know. I don't think so."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

Staggered slowly to a stop. Looking about. Everyone watching her. "What?"

Everyone facing her. Nobody speaking. Beth turned in a slow circle. Crossed to the counter. Deposited the bags. Turned back to the room.

"What?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No, tell me."

"Sarah is dead."

"No." Lurched forward as if tripped. As if she would fall.

"Auto accident last night on the way to the celebration."

"Oh, my God."

"Why they never showed."

"God, no."

"Didn't you know?"

"No."

"Why didn't you know?"

"I don't. Understand. Why would I know?"

"Well, you are married to Andrew."

"Why would he know?"

"I don't know. Why would he know?"

"He's not. Oh, God. Sarah was our friend. Paul. Oh, God. Richard. What's going to happen to Richard? He stays with Linda and Daniel. Neighbors. Next door. When they go out."

"Sarah has a sister."

"Yes, Rachel. Out of state. Somewhere. Oh, God. Does Richard know?"

"I don't. Nobody knows. We just got the news."

"Oh, God." Face burning. Stumbled toward a chair. Walking as if swimming.

"Nobody knows. Why didn't Andrew tell you?"

"He wouldn't keep it a secret. Why would he know?"

"Yes, exactly. Why would he know?"

"I don't. You keep saying. Why." Straightened her back. Standing behind a chair. "What are you implying?"

"Nothing. Nobody's implying anything. It's just. Challenged Douglas to a duel."

"Nobody challenged Douglas to a duel." Standing still. Face

Pyrrhic Kingdom

like fire. "Douglas challenged. Douglas challenged my husband. Because he didn't like my husband talking about reform."

"So they say."

"Not what they say. What happened."

"Not what Maribeth says."

"What?"

"Maribeth never says anything. Never talks to anyone. Didn't come. Wasn't invited to the celebration."

"Of course, she was invited."

"Nobody surprised she wasn't there."

"Well, why would anyone be? Andrew killed her husband." Nobody looked at her. Beth all but choking on her own breath. "I mean. Andrew won the duel. It's understandable that Maribeth would not want to face him. Be in the same room. Celebrating the outcome of a duel."

"Nobody's seen Maribeth."

"She's in seclusion."

"Right."

"Seclusion." Turning in a circle. Looking at everyone. Face burning. Fit to explode. Cheeks damp. All other eyes on the floor.

"And, Sarah was killed in a terrible accident."

"Yes," Beth said. Voice fading. Hands trembling. Reaching for the chair. "Yes, she was."

Nobody spoke. Beth sank into the chair. Hugged herself tight. The room a blur. Looked up from the table. Tried to find faces.

"I brought sandwiches," she said.



Nobody met Andrew at the door. He wandered through the apartment all but aimlessly as if he did not expect to find anyone. Beth was in the living room curled in a big chair. Glass in her hand half-empty as if she had forgotten she was holding it. Andrew went to the sideboard. Poured himself whiskey. Added a drop of cream. Ice. Sat on the couch. Not quite facing Beth. Holding his drink. Lifting it as if he intended to drink. Not quite managing it. Looking at the floor. The wall.

"Sarah is dead."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I know." His eyes fell to the drink in his hands.

"Just like that."

"I know."

"Paul, too. Package deal."

Andrew took a sip without tasting it.

"And, we thought," Beth said. "On their way. We thought. We thought."

"I know."

"They thought. They thought I would know. Should have. How could I? Why would I have known?"

"People imagine. Want to believe."

"What happened?"

"I don't."

"How could this have happened?"

"Accidents happen."

"Not to us they don't."

"No one ever believes. Imagines."

"We die horribly. Our friends die terribly. But, not like this. Accidents. Don't just happen."

"Revelation cult."

"What?"

"Millennium cult."

"Clowns."

"Out to get us. Revelation. Accidents don't just happen."

"Revelation?"

"Don't just happen to us. Not to us."

"You really think?"

"Not to us. Never to us."

"My God."

"Never to us."

"We thought. Oh, God. We thought."

"Looking into it."

"They had betrayed us."

"What?"

"They had abandoned us. So sure. They had betrayed us. Left us to the mercy of the wolves."

Silence.

"We believed," she said.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I know."

"And, it was all an accident. On their way. To support us. On their way. And, I thought. Accidents don't just happen."

"No, they don't."

"Revelation. And, I thought. I thought you had to punish them."

"No."

"Make an example. Show everyone. No favors. Have them. Accidents don't just happen."

Nothing.

"Accidents don't just happened, Andrew. They asked me. My God, they asked me. If I had known. How could I? If I had known before it happened."

Didn't say anything.

"How could I have known," she said. "How could they ask me that? Only one way."

"Stop."

"And, I remembered saying."

"Please, stop."

"I remember saying what we would have to do."

"It's not your fault."

"What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything. Didn't say anything."

"What did you do?"

"Me?"

"Douglas."

"It was an accident. Made to look like an accident. Revelation cult. Out to get us. Turn us one against another."

"Revelation."

"Friend against friend."

"Millennial conspiracy."

"Against lover."

"Nothing to do with it."

"We had nothing to do with it."

"People will talk."

"People will always talk. It's what the conspiracy wants. Their goals. Their ends."

"What do we tell them?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes."

"He'll try to be fair."

"He will."

"But, he's gone. Gone. Couldn't you see it coming?"

"Well, funny you should say that."

"He was at the celebration. You saw it, too."

"Yes, unfortunately. Not that there's anything we could have done."

"But, if you had seen."

"Well, what could we have done?"

"You could have told them. Warned them. Sent them a note."

"Well, not as such."

"But, you sent Andrew a note. Told him not to go."

"Yes, well. That's where things get weird. If we interfere, we change the future."

"That's the idea. You sent Andrew a note."

"It muddles everything up. Everything we pieced together. Thought was going to happen. All the bits and pieces unravel."

"You told Andrew he would be first."

"Have you ever tried putting all the little pieces back together? They never all quite fit."

"Told him he would be first. He is first."

"Yes, but that was just a prediction. It wasn't a note. Wasn't directions. If you stab them to death, you will be first. No, nothing like that."

"I don't understand."

"I know."

"I saw them. I saw them."

"I know."

"I have to know. I have to understand what happened. Andrew says it's a conspiracy."

"Does he?"

"I have to know, Kate."

"If there's a conspiracy?"

"If Andrew was behind it."

"Is that a question? Are you asking me?"

"Not like last time. Not like before. Not advice. The past. I want to see what happened."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Different."

"I want to know what happened. Set the wheels in motion. Accident or design."

"Not what we're normally asked to do."

"Isn't it?"

"Examine the past? No, not really."

"But, you have to. All part of the tapestry."

"Weaving together. Yes, could see it that way. Not many do. That speaks very highly of you."

"I want to know. I have to."

"Then, let us begin."



Andrew waited. The young woman, Katherine, answering the door. Turning as Andrew entered. Began to walk toward the living room.

"No, wait," Andrew said. "I'm here officially. On business." Katherine stopped. Looked at him. "I have a question. I think I need to prepare. Don't I need to prepare?"

She watched him, saying nothing, as if she were trying to comprehend what he was asking. Finally, she turned. Walked in the direction of the small apartment.

Andrew followed. Stepped into the small bedroom. Began to take off his shoes. Katherine watching him from the door. Removed his shirt. His pants. Left them folded on the bed. Katherine turned, as if bored. Left him alone in the bedroom. Half-dressed, Andrew entered the bathroom.



"Your husband is here."

"He can't see me like this!"

"Duly noted."

"I've got to get out of here! He can't see me. He doesn't know I'm here!"

"Well, you're in no condition to leave."

"He can't see me! Oh, my God, what am I going to do?"

"I think we can manage to keep you two separated."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"What's he doing here?"

"Cleansing himself, Helen tells me."

"Why would he be doing that?"

"Not looking for you, fortunately. I suspect he's going to ask about Paul and Sarah."

"What?"

"The conspiracy."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Try to help him."

"What?"

"Well, if there is a conspiracy, I would really like to know. If there isn't, I want to try to help him get past it. Accept the accident. Move on."

"You don't know?"

"No, unfortunately. Things like conspiracies are really hard to pin down. All but impossible, actually."

"But, that's why."

"We do try."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, the ceremony for you is quite different. Different questions. Different expectations. He'll be expecting something far more elaborate. I doubt he'll be home before morning."

"I'll have to remember to be cross."

"Far more elaborate ceremony. Expectations."

"I wish I could watch."

"He'll have expectations."

"Lots of pageantry, bluster and noise."

"It's not all show, as you know. But. Expectations. May not even realize he has."

"I don't."

"He'll be nervous. Confused. Excited."

"I don't. Oh, no. But, you didn't. I didn't."

"There are different ways to relieve tension. Make one receptive. There are certain techniques that are quite effective with men. Touching so close to the divine. They can't separate it from more earthly sensations, so to speak."

"I don't."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"It may not even be necessary. I don't know. Haven't seen him. I just wanted you to know."

"I don't. Yes, thank you. I think I understand."

"We'll try to keep you separated. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Wait, if you have to. If you. You know. Don't use a surrogate."

"A what?"

"You should relieve the tension yourself."

"Me?"

"I trust you, Kate. I know you're not. I know you. Nothing personal."

"I don't. I hadn't. May not be necessary."

"I trust you."

"I fear that may just be the drugs talking."

"I trust you."

"I don't really. You know there are others more willing. Enjoy this part of the process. Feel a kind-of power over them. Even when the men think they're controlling us."

"That's why I want it to be you."

"Definitely the drugs talking."

"Nothing personal."

"We don't even know if it'll be necessary."

"I trust you."



Andrew followed the young woman Katherine into the living room. Kate was sitting on one of the couches. Looked up as if she had been waiting. Smiled. Stood. Robes flowing. Andrew raised his hands. Shrugged his shoulders. Brushed at his own robes as if they didn't fit and wanted to be sure they hadn't fallen away.

"I didn't," he said. "What."

"It's okay, Andrew." Kate brushed a hand against his shoulder, walking past him. "Welcome. Sit. Do you need anything?"

"Thank you, no." Crossed to the couch. Robes rustling. "Sorry about. I'm sorry about Paul."

"As are we all."

"I'll try. He understood. Did you know there's no record? So much of what we do is word-of-mouth. I mean, can't be writ-

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ten. Must be told. Passed from generation to generation. But we have records. Archives. Reports. The conservatory alone. So many records." He followed her with his eyes as she seemed almost aimlessly to circle the room. "But, you? The ladies? No records."

"We try for an air of mystery," said only half to him as if talking to herself.

"It's all tradition. Picked up by the one responsible. Learned from. I don't know. Learned as you go. Paul. I don't know how he knew. Learned. Who taught. All gone, now."

"Pity."

"Yes, pity. I don't know. For now. I can't assign. Don't know who responsible. Don't want you treated poorly."

"Thank you." Walking back toward the couch.

"Until things settle. Until I can choose someone. Respectful. I'm going to be responsible. I'm going to look after you."

She sat, facing him. Smoothed out her robes. Flowing. Drifting. Not looking at him. Saying nothing.

"It'll be. Difficult," he said. "I'll have to learn. I'm sorry. Things may not be smooth. Especially given the circumstances."

"We will cope, I'm sure."

"Yes, exactly. It'll all be for the best."

"Why your here?"

"No, I know. Didn't have to get dressed up just to tell you. I need advice. Services. I mean, Paul. I need to know what happened to Paul."

"He died."

"Yes, but how? I mean. We don't die by chance. In our beds. Old men."

"Sure, you do."

"No, our calling. Gets under our skin. Affects us. Have you ever seen an old man? Of the company. We don't age. We go crazy. Die terribly. Horribly. In the field, if we're lucky."

"I'm the wrong one to ask about madness. Locked up in here."

"No, I'm saying this badly. Everyone thinks. Not saying. We don't die in our beds. We don't have accidents. Natural causes. Unnatural all. Even otherwise ordinary. We don't just get hit by cars. We walk into them."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"We dare not hide from the wonders of the world." She looked at him. Held his eye.

"That's one way of saying. Wonders? Not how I would put it. But, I need to know. Who killed them?"

"You did, I suppose."

"What?"

"Sure, you did." Eyes drifting away.

"Never!"

"When you summed him to the celebration."

"Oh, God."

"Gave him no choice but to come. Consequences. Made him fear the consequences."

"God."

"Fear you."

"I didn't. Mean." Rubbing his face. "Consequences. That's the word for it. Blood on my hands. As much as if I killed Douglas."

Kate looked at him.

"I know." Couldn't face her. "Might as well be Paul's blood on me. Feel it on my hands. Sometimes I feel as if it'll never wash away."

Kate said nothing.

"What was that you said? Sometimes you need to do the wrong thing in order to do the right thing? I don't know. Something like that. The thing you need. The thing you want. Good someday."

Watched him as if he was dying. He brushed his robes. Straightened his back. Looked at her.

"I need to know if he was murdered. Conspiracy against him. Millennium cult. Revelation. Sarah, an innocent bystander. Oh, God. Sarah. I'm sorry. I need to know. Did persons known or unknown have Paul killed?"

"You've asked that before." Leaning toward him.

"Not exactly. Conspiracy against the company."

"Same thing. Conspiracy against members of the company."

"You never did answer. Told me I would be first. As if that would make a difference. Well, look at me."

"You're tense, aren't you?" Reached out. Touched his arm.

"No, not that."

"All the same." Crossed. Sat beside him. "It won't do."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I'm sorry. I didn't."

"May not have thought. May not have planned. But." Touched him. Fingers running down his arm. Crossing his lap. "Expectations, all the same."

"I've been here before."

"But, never asked for a divination. Not since the first time." Hand in his robes. "Look at you. Already responding. Eager. Not my touch." Moving. "I saw you standing there." Whispered in his ear. Her chest brushing against his arm. "Bulging. Trying to hide. Little pup-tent. Half lit up."

"I'm sorry." Breath running fast at the hands pulling at the folds of his robes. "It's not. Word for it."

"I know." She moved so fast he gasped. Straddled his legs. Robes slipping away. "All the same." Resting before him. Robes slipping. Beautiful freckles. "I can feel your heart beat. I can hear your breath." Looking in his eyes. "You must relax."

"I love my wife."

"I know." She reached down somewhere out of view. Near their feet. Brought her hand back. Fingers glistening. Reached into her robes. Parting them. Reached down. "You'll have to forgive me. A little something to make things glide."

"What?"

"It's not the same." Looked over his shoulder. Past his ear. "Easy for men, I suppose. Always so eager. Always ready. Slightest provocation." Placed her hands on the back of the couch. Surrounding his face. "Women sometimes need. Make it easier." She met his gaze. "Now, if you would be so kind. My hands are busy."

She raised herself slightly. Her face all but touching his own. Eyes locked. Could feel her breath. Warm. Moist. Trembling, he reached between them. Touched her hip. Held. Guided. Lowered. Andrew arched his back, trying not to cry out. She was warm. Holding him. Moving. Slowly. So slowly. Looking into his eyes. Matching his gaze. Hearts racing. Feeling her pulse. Breath. Noses brushing. Lips touching. Undulating. Dancing. Moving together. Like lovers.

He cried out, burning. Trembling. Trying to push her away. Kate holding him. Arms around him. Chest pressed against him.

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around. Watching it swirl. Almost as if the mixture was bleeding. Running together.

The coffee was cold. Started to get up. Thought she heard the door. Froze. Thought she heard voices. Not wanting to move. Settled back to the table. Coffee cup in her hands. Trying not to move. Thought she heard floorboards. Someone moving. Someone walking. She put the cup down. Sat forward in her chair. Shoulders straight. Reached for her orange juice. Almost knocked it over. Started dabbing at the tablecloth with a napkin.

Andrew appeared in the doorway. Beth froze. Folded and put down the napkin. Trying not to look at him. Andrew wandered past the dining-room table. Stood next to her. She took a sip of her juice.

"I don't," he said. Eyes for the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't. Don't."

"Was it good?"

He froze, looking at her as if studying an ancient text. She tried not to hold his gaze letting her eyes drift over the table. Fingers tracing the edge of her orange juice glass.

"No. I don't." Eyes went wide. Like watching a slow-motion horror unfold. "Oh, God. No. I'm sorry. Didn't. Plan. Not what I intended."

"The ladies Katherine are your responsibility, I know. I understand."

"No, it's not." Hand to his face. "I had to know. I had to. Paul and Sarah. What happened to them."

"You consulted them."

"I didn't know what else to do. Everyone looking at me. Rumors. Whispering. Nothing to do with it. I had nothing to do with it. But, without an answer. They wonder. Question. What did I know? Why am I evasive?"

"Last time, you told me."

"It wasn't planned. I just. I had to know. Couldn't take it. After we talked. I couldn't take you doubting."

"What?"

"Questioning."

"I never doubted."

"Yes, you did."

"Never."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Not directly. But, just like everybody else. Looking at me. Watching me. Asking questions as if I should know the answer. Questioning."

"Never. I never questioned."

"Well, even if I imagined. I couldn't let it be. I had to find out. I had to know."

Hands drifted to her coffee cup. Not wanting to look at him. Trembling. Tried to lift her cup without trembling. Tasted cold coffee. Almost spitting. Coughed. Dropped the cup. Coughing into her hand. Holding her mouth closed with her fist.

"So what happened to them?" she said from behind fingers.

"I don't know."

"Not very useful then."

"No, I don't know. It doesn't work like that. Like a puzzle made of stained-glass window fragments. Nothing may match."

"Learning random things you don't even recognize." Leaning back. "A patchwork quilt you have to fold this way and that." Trembling. "Hoping to find meaning in the layers."

"They say the strangest things."

"Like you cannot die." Whispering.

"Don't joke. Not even. They said that."

"What?"

"They said I cannot die."

"No."

"No, not like that." Sinking into a chair. "Cannot be killed. Craziest thing. They said I cannot be killed by man. By a man."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Why would they say such things?"

"It doesn't even mean anything. Technically, Paul and Sarah were killed in a car accident. When a car crashed into them. Killed by a car."

"Oh, so they are just messing with me."

"I don't know. Why would they say such a thing?"

"They're mad. Try to keep you off guard. Say crazy things just to remind you that they are crazy."

"Oh, don't say such things."

"Defending them now?"

"No, I mean. You defend them."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Of course I do."

"Of course you do."

"No, it's true. They are ill treated. Dancing bears. Little more than kept women. Sex workers. Slaves, really."

"Your own private harem."

"What a thing to say. I don't. I would never."

"Never?"

Looked as if the world had died. Looked as if his face would explode, rupture and collapse back into itself. Tried to speak. Face contorting as if in pain. Beth watched, saying nothing. Watching him. Andrew caught himself. Dropped his face into his hands. Tried not to move. Tried not to breathe.

"It's not what I want." Said between fingers.

Beth only watched him.

"They don't even," he said. "Tell me anything. I mean. You will be first. You cannot die. What's the good of that? It's like they don't know the answer and cover it up by spewing random shit."

"They know things."

"Oh, defending them now?"

"They said you would die."

"Oh, right. Before they said I couldn't die. Can't make up their minds."

"Maybe it still means something."

"It's not even the question I asked."

"Man cannot kill you? What about a woman? What about." Choked on the word. "What about a monster?"

"Creature from the blackest pit? Monster from the abyss? Oh, wonderful prediction. That's like saying I will wake up in the morning."

"Strange thing to say when you want to know how Paul and Sarah died."

"I know."

"Oh, Lord, it could be. It could be. Unnatural birth. Pulled from the mother's womb before his time."

"No. You mean it could be a warning? Someone not to be trusted?"

"It could be anything. Should two countries go to war, a mighty empire shall fall."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Right, that sounds familiar. Means they're making it up as they go. Cover thine ass, your honor."

"Could be anything. C-section. Breach birth. Twins."

"Now, you're just imagining things."

"It could still mean something. A warning."

"Because Paul died?"

Beth said nothing.

"Right, now all I have to do is be on the lookout for someone without a navel. C-section. Do they keep records on that kind-of thing?" Ran his hands through his hair. "I must be going mad."

"Someone must know."

"I'm sure we keep detailed files." Gaze drifted across the table. Reached for a coffee cup. Stopped. Hands fell back to his lap. "What a thing to ask. Say, Jonathan, do we keep records and birth announcements?"

"There must be a way. It must mean something."

"Oh, God, I'm going to ask him. What will he think of me?"

"That it's a lead. Trail to the conspiracy."

"Right, wouldn't that beat all."

"Maybe that's why they said it."

"So I would find out. So I would know."

"Not a very direct path."

"But, I have to. Oh, dear God, I'm going to ask. I'm going to sound like a loony. But, I can't help myself. I have to know. I have to."

"I know."



Henry was in the sitting room, leaning back in the thick leather chair. Papers and reports in his hands. Fanned as if holding a hand of cards. Hushed footsteps. Let the papers fold like wilting leaves. Watched Jonathan approaching. Sink into one of the adjacent chairs.

"Coffee's cold, I fear," Henry said. Jonathan staring off into space almost as if nobody else was there. Henry looked about, lifting his cup. Papers stacked in one hand. Looked about. Saw one of the waiters move. All but a shadow against the wall. Hen-

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ry swished the cup as if to take in both Jonathan and himself. Shadow turned and vanished. Henry nodded, as if knowing that fresh coffee would come. Put his cup back down. Jonathan had not moved.

"I don't know," he finally said as if Henry had asked him a question and he had finally reached an answer. "I just don't know."

"It isn't that bad. Some people even like cold coffee. Never cared for day old coffee myself."

Jonathan looked at him. Mouth a grim line.

"You know there are people who leave it sitting out for days," Henry said. "Aging it. Won't touch coffee unless it is properly aged."

"Has it's charm."

"Oh, well, there you are. Must be a taste of the young."

"So old, are you?"

"You know what they say. Anybody older than you is ancient? Same both ways. Anybody younger than you is a child."

"Really?"

"Just wait. You're not old enough to notice. Everybody younger than you really is still just a child."

"Drank tons of ancient coffee back in my school days."

"Not so long ago in your case."

"I suppose."

"You would think we would drink more aged coffee given what we do. But. Seems to be one of the benefits of the company. Always someone about to freshen up the pot."

"Surprised we don't drink tea."

"Oh, let's not be savages. Wait, no. I think that's."

"The other way round. Yes. We're the savages."

"We're the savages. What a thing to say. Given what we do."

"What we do."

"More so now than ever before?"

"The things we do." Ran a hand through his hair. "Things we do."

"More troubling pronouncements from the boss-man?"

"You wouldn't." Jonathan looked at him. Saw the waiter ap-

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proaching. Fresh cups. Steaming service. Waited as he poured. "Thank you." Taking a cup.

"Excellent blend," Henry said. "I really should ask them after the roast. Or is it blend? Really should know. The problem with service. So easy to lose track of important things."

"Only things that matter."

"I know." Sipped. "Needs cream."

"The requests are getting stranger."

"Well, I didn't actually mean cream." Held up the little creamer. "Is this cream? Low-fat milk, I hope."

"You wouldn't believe what he asked after."

Henry sat back in his chair, watching the milk swirl and blend like a cloud. Billowing. Rushing. Let the breath run through him. Shoulders sagging.

"I can imagine," he said and took a sip, holding the cup before his face. Feeling the warm steam on his cheeks. "Is it the conspiracy or more recruitment techniques?"

"I don't even know anymore. Blurring together. This is definitely more conspiracy."

"Not all of his ideas are bad."

"No. No, they're not."

"Some are quiet good, actually. I think. I think I resist half the time just because it's different."

"Familiarity is like concrete."

"It's what we do. Ritual. Sacrifice. Not that we sacrifice. Offerings, I mean. We sacrifice our time. Our health. Our sanity. Our very lives."

"Rituals work. These rituals work. These words. These artifacts. These beliefs."

"Not just pretty words. All mean something. We are the hand of God. Working through us. Not just pretty words."

"Rattled off. Prattled off. Face of danger."

"We forget. Sometimes, we forget. In the face of danger. How could we forget? And, yet. We do. Even in the face of all evidence, we forget. Rattling off words. Forgetting their meaning."

"He wants us to remember."

"You think?"

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"Not just the words. Beneath the words. Meaning. Their meaning. Faith. Belief. Hand of God, as you said. Not just pretty words."

"Fine line," Henry said. "So what was his latest command then? Conspiracy? Recruitment? Body armor?"

"Well, I hope it isn't recruitment. That would just be strange."

"Given what we do?"

"Yes."

"Then he has turned a corner, hasn't he?"

"The others will talk."

"They always do."

"You have to talk him down."

"Who?"

"Andrew. Talk to him. Get him to back away from some of the crazier notions."

"Oh, I don't know. Don't have the best track record there, remember?"

"Captain Peacock."

"Mister Peacock, thank you. Captain was from a television show, wasn't it?"

"I don't know."

"Won't let me forget. Sometimes, I don't think I want to."

"Balancing act, as you say."

"So, I don't know how much good I can do. Talking to him. I can talk at him."

"Don't try to talk him into anything. Or out of. Maybe, just talk."

"Just talk?"

"Maybe, just talk. Paul is gone. Lonely at the top. Maybe, he just needs a friend."



Old paintings of serious men with serious faces hung from the walls as if the very thought of touching the world filled them with disgust and loathing. They hung over the long table, condemning it with frozen, unblinking eyes. Andrew sat under their gaze. Books and papers gathered at one end of the table as if hording them all together somehow made them more palatable.

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"You spend so much time in here," Henry said.

"It's my office."

"But not your home."

"Oh? There's a difference? What do you call the lounge then?"

"A good place for coffee. You should join me there sometime."

"No."

"It would do you good."

"Spend too much time in there."

"Nonsense. I get out and about. See the sights. Hear the sounds. Smell the. Smells. That old city smell on everything. Especially after it rains."

"They look at me."

"An occupational hazard, stepping outside one's door."

"Can't have them looking at me."

"Bound to happen now and again. Can't be avoided."

"No, not them. Not the people. Civilians." Took in the room with his fingertips. "I can't have them looking at me. The company. Judging me."

"Lounge has different decor, you know."

"Not what I. Not about history. Legacy. I mean the people. Now. The company. Looking at me. From the shadows. From the alcoves and doorways."

"The chairs, too, I suppose. They are quite comfortable."

"Don't mock."

"Don't mean to. You make it so easy."

"I'm losing them, I fear. Mocking me."

"They're not."

"Mister Peacock. Flamenco man. Mocking."

"It's not like that."

"So, you say."

"Yes, so I say. They don't call names. They don't gossip behind your back."

"It's all they do."

"Well, there is talk. Somewhat unavoidable, talk. But, it's not what you mean. Name calling. Gossiping. Nothing of the kind."

"I hear things."

"Healthy discussion and debate. Look. Many of your ideas. Scare people."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Mister Peacock."

"Don't like change. Don't like challenges. Especially given what we do. Superstitious. Upsetting the balance. Way things have been done."

"Mister Peacock."

"Yes, I know. Mister Peacock. I was quite upset. Perfect example. But for how long did I harp on it? When was the last time I called you names?"

"Just the other day."

"No, that was you, Andrew. Throwing it back in my face. It's like you hear it in your head and assume it was me."

"So, I'm hearing voices now?"

"No. I mean. I don't know. Perhaps you are. Given what we do."

"All a little mad."

"I suppose. Given what we do. Have to be cautious at times."

"Imagining things?"

"I didn't say that."

"Conspiracies."

"Didn't say."

"Seen it in your eyes. Rolling your eyes except you're not. But imagining it. Thinking an eye roll but not actually doing it because I'm watching."

"That's crazy talk, Andrew."

"There, again. You just did it."

"No."

"Just now."

"Not what I meant. Figuratively. A figure of speech."

"I'm not crazy."

"I know."

"I know the difference."

"We all do, Andrew. Occupational hazard and everything."

"Conspiracy. Trying to track a conspiracy. Like sifting sand. Do you have any idea how hard?"

"Given what we do? Yes, I can imagine how hard."

"Rumors. Reports. When you have to talk around what you mean. When you're not sure if an old tale that everybody knows actually means something. Where the pink elephants go to die."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes, I know. It's why. Why I sit in the lounge. Sea of people. Changing faces. Mocking me for a mushroom growing in that chair. But, that's the point. The people. Voices. Faces. Anything but to be alone. Nothing but my thoughts for company. It's my own little ritual for trying to avoid madness."

"So, it's madness now?"

"No, you're deliberately missing my point."

"I have to be alone."

"In God's name, why?"

"Secrets. I cannot share. People think I'm crazy? People think I had Paul killed? Imagine if they saw me. Chasing conspiracies no one believes. The things we seek. The clues we sift, and they think I'm crazy."

"Nothing of the kind."

"Jonathan thinks me insane."

"Oh, he does not."

"No, really. Saw it in his eyes. The order I gave him. I'd think I was crazy, too."

"I'm sure it can be."

"It's hard to track a conspiracy, you know. The things you have to track. The notions you have to pursue. Leave no stone unturned. No monster untouched. No child unmolested."

"Okay, I think you've lost me there."

"Unnatural causes. Unnatural birth."

"Well, we track that all the time. Nothing unusual there."

"I meant human birth."

"Well, that's still rather a broad area, isn't it? Includes all kinds of things. Talking unnatural birth. If you want to get technical, I was a c-section baby myself."

"What?"

"Oh, yes. Emergency caesarean. Pulled unnaturally from my mother's womb. I rank among the unborn, if you want to get morbidly technical."

"I see."

"So they tell me, anyway. Not like I remember any of it myself. I was only just a little thing. Have to take people's word for it."

"Kept secret, did you?"

"Well, it's not the kind of thing you ask on a job application."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

I mean, what a thing to say. I should retort that you never asked. Kept a secret, indeed."

"You're right. I never asked. I'm sorry."

"Not that it's any of your business, anyway."

"Maybe it is. Given what we do. Unborn, as you say."

"Oh, for the love of. It's just a joke, Andrew. Nobody's unborn."

What a thing to say."

"Given what we do."

"Look, I know we've all been under a lot of strain. Paul's death has hit us all really hard. Worse than losing Douglas. People have adjusted to that quite well."

"And how would you know?"

"People talk, Andrew. It's what they do. But, there's no conspiracy against you."

"There is."

"Okay, except for the revolution."

"Revelation."

"Yes, the revelation cult we're trying to track. But, nothing from within. Nobody within the company is planning to challenge your leadership. From what I hear, people like the stability you bring."

"Now, you're mocking me."

"No, Andrew."

"Stability I bring?"

"Okay, maybe I'm just talking out of my ass. I don't know, Andrew. I'm trying to assure you that things aren't as bad as they sound."

"Why would you want me to think there's no conspiracy? What are you playing?"

"Oh, for the love of. Nothing, Andrew. I'm not conspiring anything."

"Then, what are you doing here?"

"I'm worried about you, man."

"Oh, am I unfit now?"

"No."

"Need to be replaced?"

"Where did that come from?"

"Only a matter of time."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I can understand your concern. Needing to pursue every angle. Knowing some sound more far fetched than others. We deal with this crap every day."

"It's crap, now?"

"It doesn't mean we're conspiring against you just because you killed."

"Yes?"

"Just because you defeated Douglas in a duel."

"Why did you say that?"

"What?"

"Why those words in particular?"

"I don't know. People talk. Doesn't mean they believe."

"Anybody in particular?"

"No."

"Paul, perhaps?"

"I don't."

"Did he say it was murder?"

"No, I don't think. No, he never. He would never say such a thing."

"I see."

"He was your friend, Andrew. He would never spread rumors and lies against you."

"Thank you."

"Never, Andrew."

"Yes, thank you."



"You were right."

"I was afraid of that."

"Pretty far gone."

"I hate being right."

"It's everything that's happened."

"So sudden."

"He'll back away from the edge."

"He'll crack."

"Andrew is stronger than you know. Stronger than you give him credit for."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"I can't imagine."

"Paul and Sarah."

"Good people."

"Yes, exactly."

"Never forget them."

"No, train of thought."

"What were you thinking?"

"Sarah. Paul and Sarah."

"Yes."

"They were good people."

"Yes."

"They were good to each other. Loved each other."

"Yes."

"Never got between them. Never backed up on them. Paul's responsibilities. Never came between them."

"Hid it well."

"No, shut up, don't talk like that. Don't belittle."

"I didn't mean."

"They accepted. Sarah accepted. Never let it come between them."

"Paul worked hard. He loved her."

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I know."

"I try very hard."

"I know."

"Very hard."

"I know. I know you do."

"It's just expectations. I don't know. Confusing. They're confusing."

"I know. I understand."

"Do you?"

"Well, why shouldn't I? What's wrong with knowing things?"

"Nothing. It's just. I don't know."

"Nothing wrong with knowing things. Taking an interest."

"Understanding. Non-judgmental."

"Empathetic, I suppose."

"Yes, very progressive of you."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Thank you, I think."

"Sorry, I didn't mean."

"Oh, don't take things so seriously."

"Well, it's. I don't know. What's involved. Expected. Said you didn't want to know. Want to talk about it."

"Easy to say, I know. Everything's fine. Easy to say."

"Then, to hear. Think about. Actually know."

"Different story."

"Try not to think about. I try not to. Expectations. What's expected. They expect. Try not to fulfill expectations. I don't know. Try not to."

"I know. I know you do. Try not to talk about it. Think about it. Everything's okay."

"Try not to smell like them, I remember. Place full of incense. Try not to smell."

"Too much. It's too much."

"Didn't mean."

"We must stick together. Need each other. Rely on each other."

"Yes."

"What we've done. What we know."

"Need each other."

"Not let anything come between us. Important."

"Yes."

"Paul and Sarah. Oh, God, Paul and Sarah. Don't let anything happen to us like Paul and Sarah."

"I'm working on that."

"Don't say that."

"What? Tracking down leads. Following rumors. You know how hard it is following rumors? When everyone thinks you crazy?"

"Oh, you mean."

"What?"

"Happened to Paul and Sarah. Revelation."

"Yes, tracking the revelation cult. Not easy. Everyone thinking me crazy."

"Let them."

"Why I need you. Rock. Anchor."

"Need each other."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Never let anything come between us. Ladies Katherine. Won't consult the ladies Katherine."

"Good."

"Expectations. Won't trip over expectations."

"Stay away from them as much as possible. Don't rely on them."

"Oh, it would just add to the rumors that I'm crazy. Relying on them. Test of sanity, anyway. We always need to be careful. Given what we do."

"Given what you do."



"Never did answer my question."

"What?"

"Never told me what's bothering you."

"Oh?"

"Avoided the question. Never told me what's bothering you. Wake up. Hey. Never answered my question."

"I'm awake."

"Never answered my question."

"Didn't I?"

"No, went on about the ladies Katherine. Clever change of subject."

"I'm sorry."

"Doing it again. Hey, not getting off so easy. You'll be sleeping on the couch in a minute. Never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Oh, now you're asking for it. What question."

"Never actually asked a question."

"Oh, I did."

"Not really. Generic query."

"Oh, now you remember?"

"What? No, I mean. Didn't actually ask a question. What time is it? Never actually asked a question."

"Yes, I did. Something's bothering you, and I want to know."

"Fixated on. What are you fixated?"

"I am not."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Just want to know. Oh, right, I know."

"Yes?"

"You'll never guess who meets the criteria."

"What?"

"The criteria. Who can kill me, remember?"

"Oh. Who?"

"Henry."

"No."

"Yes, can you believe it? Henry was not born in the natural way."

"Henry?"

"C-section baby. Admitted it himself."

"No, I don't. What does it mean?"

"Nothing, I hope. But, I don't know. I have to keep that in mind now."

"Becky never said."

"Paul and I talked about. Who could be first. Not him. Not me. Could we follow Henry?"

"No."

"I know. We were just talking. Now, I have to consider. Henry could be first."

"No."

"People would follow him. It's true. Nothing we can do about it. People would follow if he ever put his mind to it."

"What can we do?"

"He's never really wanted. Likes rules. Likes certainty. Never needed to be in charge."

"But, Katherine said."

"Speculation. Never wanted to be in charge. But, then I never needed to be in charge. Never even considered it."

"Here you are."

"Here we are."

"Like dominoes. Oh, God, like dominoes falling. What do we do?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

"Andrew."

"Nothing to be done. Keep an eye on him. Keep an eye on ev-

Pyrrhic Kingdom

eryone. Drive me mad. Keep an eye on him. Watch for ambition. He's trying to be nice."

"What?"

"I suppose. Came to see me. Didn't know what he wanted."

"But, if he knows?"

"That he can be first? I don't know if it's crossed his mind. I don't know. I just don't know."

"Can't be too careful."

"I'll have to keep an eye on him. Too much. Don't want to consult the ladies."

"No, don't. No point."

"Unless he's involved in the conspiracy."

"What a thing to say."

"I know. I don't. But, I have to consider. Keep an eye on him. Don't want to keep an eye on him."

"Oh, God, it's too much."

"Ambition. If he grows in ambition."

"No, he's a good man."

"Doesn't like the changes. Captain Peacock. Doesn't like."

"What?"

"Name he calls me. The body armor. Very colorful. Visible on a motorcycle."

"Like a peacock."

"Exactly. Calls me Captain Peacock."

"In jest, surely."

"Have to keep an eye on him. Don't want to have to kill him."

"No."

"What can I do? If he thinks I had Paul killed."

"But, you didn't. Oh, God, you didn't. You had nothing to do with that."

"Why I have to root out the Revelation cult. Expose the conspiracy. Remove doubt."

"You must. Oh, God, you must."

"I know. Working on that."

"What are we going to do?"

"Working on that."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

"It's too much. Too much."

"You're so tense, Elizabeth."

"I don't know what to do. Oh, God, Kate, I don't know what to do."

"Relax. The first thing you must do is relax."

"I don't know. I don't know."

"No good to yourself. No good to anyone if you cannot relax."

"Oh, God, what do I do?"

"There are things we can do. Ways to help you relax."

"I need to know, Kate. There are things I need to do."

"And, we will help you."

"I have to know. Told Andrew to stay away. Promised not to ask. But, I must know. Have to find out. Help both of us."

"Of course."

"Henry. Oh, God, Henry. Must know if he is plotting against Andrew."

"And, we will find out. Divine the truth of it."

"Knew I could count on you."

"Of course. But, first, you must relax."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Refresh yourself. Cleanse yourself."

"Ran right in here, didn't I?"

"A bath first, I think. Nice. Hot. Relaxing."

"I suppose."

"Yes, a nice long hot bath."

"Then, you'll show me? Teach me?"

"Yes, we will show you many things."

"Promise?"

"I promise."



"You were right."

"Oh, good, I like being right."

"Spend too much time in that office."

"Coffee's just as good out here."

"Isolated."

"Fresh air. Reasonably fresh air, anyway."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Let the others see me. Judge if they will."

"Well, to be fair, they would judge you a hermetic recluse if you stayed locked away in your office."

"Harder to judge someone when you see them every day."

"That's the spirit."

"Is that even my office?"

"By this point, everybody has accepted that it is."

"No, I mean. It's a long table like a meeting room. Did Douglas have a separate office? Desk and everything?"

"You know? Never gave it any thought."

"They would have shown me, surely."

"Don't see why the household staff would hold such a grudge as to. Well. Begrudge you the actual office."

"Maybe Douglas spent so much time in that long room with the table that it became his office? I don't know."

"Food for thought."

"Shouldn't dwell on it. Madness that way lies."

"Madness lies in wait many ways. You know, here's a thought. What if it was shown to Douglas that way?"

"You mean, been so long the first's office that nobody remembers where the actual office is? The long room has been the de facto office of the first for longer than anybody can remember?"

"Stands to reason, that does."

"That's rather amusing actually."

"Welcome to your office."

"I wonder where the actual office might be?"

"Probably filled with books and reports. Floor to ceiling. Been storage space so long nobody can remember what it once was."

"I'll try not to dwell on it. Madness lies that way."

"Madness lies many ways."



"Most promising."

"What?"

"Came in. Talked to me."

"Yes, I heard."

"Civil conversation and everything."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Well, so much paper. Try gathering it up all the time. Dragging it from room to room. Guaranteed to lose something that way."

"Wish I had that luxury. I always have to scoop it up. Who knows what the staff might make of it otherwise."

"So you could be missing things."

"I try not to dwell on it. Madness lying that way and all of that."

"Explain why you haven't noticed. We've got a lead."

"Oh?"

"Things have been quite. You may have noticed. But, we've got a lead."

"Getting a handle on the information bunching? Not so much a swarm?"

"Oh, it was a swarm. Most definitely a swarm. We've got a lead."

"Yes, you keep saying."

"Pattern. Source. Conspiracy of the swarm. We've got a lead."

"So, I understand that we've got a lead."

"From the recruitment drive. There is another group."

"No."

"Revelation. Millennial cult. Encouraging. Recruiting. I knew it. I knew they were out there."

"They're always out there. Leaving bible study fliers all over college campuses. We do the same, right?"

"Not important. We're onto them. Tracking them back, and we're about ready to strike."

"I'm sorry. Strike?"

"Yes, we're going to hit them hard. We know where they live, and we're going to strike."

"How exactly?"

"Assembling a team, of course. We're going to raid their base of operations."

"What?"

"Guardian Angels do it all the time."

"Guardian?"

"Citizens group protecting people from crime. Guardian Angels. Go around disrupting drug operations and the like."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes, I know about the Guardian Angels."

"We'll hit them hard."

"It's not all the Guardian Angels do. In fact, I think it's the least thing they do. Helping people. Protecting people. That's the idea. That's what we do."

"We also work against Revelation cults. Millennial groups. Stop them before they cause trouble. Kill people."

"Not by raiding them."

"They're working against us. We have to defend ourselves."

"Yes, we expose them. Enlighten people about them. Turn their own membership against them."

"We hit them."

"With truth. With information. Show them the way of God."

"Yes, we will show them that we are God's own righteous fury."

"No, Andrew. No. We don't raid."

"Yes."

"We don't hurt our fellow man."

"But, we must. To stop the corrupt. To bring justice to evil. Those that wish the end of the world."

"By exposing them to light. Teaching them. Starving them of their membership so that those who cannot be saved might whither and die of their own corruption. Lost. Ineffectual. God's will."

"Working against us."

"We don't hit them, Andrew."

"What would you have us do?"

"What we have always done. We don't hit them. We don't raid. We enlighten."

"Worked so well for Paul."

"That. We don't."

"So many agree with you, do they?"

"So, is it revenge you want?"

"Justice."

"God's own fury."

"We are the instrument of His will."

"Against the corruption and evil that seeps into this world. Things. Monsters. Burn them from this world. That is our will."

"Men have fallen."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"We don't burn our fellow man no matter how far they have fallen."

"Why do you say such things?"

"It's not for us to judge our fellow man."

"Defend them."

"Who are we to decide? How are we to know when someone is beyond redemption?"

"Protect those that would kill us. Have killed us."

"No, that's not it at all."

"Conspiracy."

"Do we even know it's a conspiracy? Out there. Recruiting. Always recruiting. Always groups recruiting."

"How do you know so much?"

"I know as much as you. How many actively working against us? How many?"

"Only takes one."

"What proof?"

"Paul is dead."

"What proof is that, man?"

"Enough."

"And, if this lead should not be the cult we seek? If they should be but fools? What then? After we have hit them? What then?"

"What they deserve."

"Crucible. Remember *The Crucible*."

"Comparing us to the government, now? Are we seeking fear for personal gain?"

"Remember that the majority of conspiratorial cells were made up of informants. Existing only because they were trying to root out the very thing they were perpetuating. Growing and growing like cancer. Doubting each other for no other reason than they belonged to the same group they were trying to stop."

"We are our own conspiracy, is that it?"

"No."

"Then, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying we don't hit groups. We don't raid cults."

"Why take their side?"

"I'm not."

"We don't defend ourselves?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Who will follow you? This raid. Who has gathered willingly to hit them?"

"The team is forming."

"How willingly? How many know your intent?"

"They follow."

"At what cost? It's not what we do, Andrew. We cleanse the night with fire. Is that how you will hit them? Burn them with fire?"

"If necessary."

"And, what then? Will they hit back? Will they defend themselves because we have chosen wrong or hastily?"

"They deserve."

"Who else deserves, Andrew? How little chance shall we give them?"

"Redemption."

"How much have we gathered about this group? Is it enough? Is it really enough to burn them from the earth?"

"Acting hastily, you say?"

"Yes, please reconsider. Please think it through."

"We are not yet ready to strike."

"It's all I ask. Time to gather information. Study them. Watch them. Learn."

"A team will follow orders, but it is better if they agree."

"Yes, it's not what we do, Andrew."

"We don't strike."

"We don't strike our fellow man."

"Food for thought. Thank you, Henry. I'm going to remember this."

"Oh, come on, Andrew. You know I'm right."

"We don't defend ourselves. Yes, I'm going to remember."

"Our calling, Andrew. Remember our calling."

"Against the dark. Yes, I haven't forgotten."

"Good."

"The dark takes many forms."

"It does, Andrew. Remember *The Crucible*."

"I will."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

Rebecca pulled up a chair. Coffee cup held in both hands.

"Good morning, Beth."

"Morning, Becky. Good to see you."

"You as well. Here so early. Haven't seen you much here at all."

"Yes, well, I've been pursuing other projects. Kept me away from the conservatory proper."

"Guilt brought you back, has it? Responsibility?"

"Competing responsibilities, I suppose. Guilt? Not so much."

"I was worried."

"Oh?"

"Our husbands feuding again. Emma still not really speaking. Thought you were keeping your distance."

"No, not that. Not from you. We've had our share of differences. Don't want to continue."

"Our husbands feuding."

"Like children. So much like children. Don't want to be like that."

"Somebody should get along. Prevent things from getting too out of hand."

"Talk to them. Try talking to them."

"It'll blow over. Always seems to blow over."

"All connected. We're all connected, you know. Need to remember that."

"Yes."

"Everything. Everyone. Where we are. All the records and manuscripts. Think about it. The number of people who have passed these doors. Touched these records. Connected to all of them."

"Feuding making you melancholy?"

"No, it's just. Don't you ever think about it? Just feel it all around you?" Stretched out her arms as if reaching for the world.

"What?"

"The interconnectedness of all things. Everything. Just everything. Touching. Affecting. Existing."

"We're all part of the grace of God. If that's what you mean."

"I suppose. I don't know. More than that. Don't you ever just feel it?"

"You sound like a hippie."

"Maybe they were on to something."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Yes. Hash. LSD."

"Brownies. Sugar cubes. Postage stamps."

"It would be ecstasy these days, wouldn't it? Or is that not what the kids take anymore?"

"I don't know."

"Making me feel old."

"Sorry."

"Speaking of, you're not tripping the light fantastic, are you?"

"No, I don't know."

"What's come over you?"

"It's no good when our husbands are feuding."

"Dipping into the prescription meds to cope, are you? You know that stuff is like heroin in pill form, right?"

"Thought they took that off the market."

"Doesn't mean you can't get it. What's come over you?"

"Nothing. Everything. Sarah is gone. I just don't want to be feuding."

"Well, stay away from the prescription stuff. I'm going to start worrying about you."

"Don't want that."

"Promise."

"I promise to stay away from the prescription stuff."

"And, the hard stuff."

"And, the hard stuff. Don't even know where to come by it."

"Good."

"Do you think they'll stop?"

"What?"

"Feuding."

"I don't know. I hope so."



"Not so tense. Relaxed."

"Getting used to it, you mean?"

"I suppose."

"Resigned to the inevitable?"

"One way of putting it."

"Lasted longer. What if I start to enjoy it?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"We'll worry about that when it happens."

"What about yourself, then?"

"Me?"

"Saw you reach down. Tried to hide it this time. Spare my feelings, but I saw."

"Not out to humiliate you. Works against relief from tension."

"Will you always need it?"

"The assist?"

"If that's what we're calling it."

"I suppose. Can't always be ready. Moments notice."

"There are others. Kate. I mean, the other Kate."

"Yes."

"Said some enjoy."

"Did she now."

"Yes, well, give the wrong impression, I suppose."

"Don't want to give the wrong impression. But, yes, will always need."

"Always?"

"Yes, even if they enjoy. Moments notice and all of that. More than one way to enjoy."

"Ah."

"Not why you're here anyway."

"True."

"Why are you here?"

"Revelation cult, again."

"Hard to track. Very hard."

"I know. It's strange. Makes you seem almost ineffectual."

"What a thing to say."

"Well, what have you done right?"

"The things you say. You are first, are you not?"

"True."

"You don't ask about the dark."

"I never ask."

"We track the dark. Pinpoint it."

"I know. I read the reports. Cross reference with the field teams. Like playing darts."

"The things you say."

"Not your fault there are so few incursions."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"No, it is not."

"Ask the hard ones."

"Yes, you do. Gives you excuses to come back. Need our services. All our services."

"No, you throw yourselves at me."

"If that's what you wish to tell yourself."

"Maybe you should think about what you tell yourself."

"Resist so hard."

"Well, I need you. That came out badly."

"Never ask about the dark."

"No."

"Maybe, I should tell you."

"If that would help pinpoint the Revelation cults, yes."

"No."

"Just teasing me now."

"You want to know about Henry."

"What? Yes, actually."

"His role in the great conspiracy."

"What? I knew it."

"Yes, that is why you are here. Tracing millennial cults. Hunting revelation groups."

"What has Henry done?"

"I will show you."



"You were right."

"Music to my ears."

"Just a millennial cult. Amounted to nothing."

"Seems to be the way with them."

"If we had gone in, guns blazing. So to speak."

"Tragic."

"Watching them. Investigating. Amounted to nothing. Hollow shell."

"Charismatic figure at the center, perchance?"

"Only thing holding them together. Amounted to nothing."

"Always the way with these groups. Lots of excitement. Think they're the center of the universe. Fizzle out."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"If we had gone in, tragic. Like you said. Disaster."

"No way you could have known."

"Over eager. Jumping at shadows."

"Wanting somebody to be responsible."

"Oh, they're still out there. Responsible for Paul. Sarah. They'll pay."

"The right people have to pay, Andrew."

"Watching. We watched them. Right thing to do. Nothing at the center. Hollow. Empty. Like a house of cards."

"Shine a little light on darkness. It's what we do."

"So empty. Almost as if. Sounds crazy, I know. Almost as if they knew we were watching."

"Rubbish."

"I know. Crazy notion. How would they know we were watching?"

"Well, that was the whole point, wasn't it? Shine a light on darkness. Make people see them for what they were. Of course, they folded."

"If they knew we were watching."

"Why would they know we were watching? What difference would it make? Folded like a house of cards. Like they do. Like they always do."

"Yes, like they always do."

"All the same, it was the right thing to do."

"Yes."

"Guns blazing, seriously?"

"I know."

"What good would it have done?"

"You're right. I know. I know you're right, Henry."

"It's not who we are."

"Wanting justice. Wanting someone to pay for Paul and Sarah."

"In time. Given time. The truth will out itself."

"Yes. Yes, I think it will."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

Went right away to the small rooms so much like a separate apartment all to itself. Shedding clothes. Washed herself. Cleansed herself. Found robes waiting. Found Helen waiting for her when she finished dressing. Followed her, walking all but beside her, to the main rooms.

"Elizabeth," Kate said, holding out her hands.

"I want to know." Took her hands, gripping them hard. "I want to know it all."

"Of course."

"So beautiful. It's all so beautiful."

"Yes."

"Andrew's away. Traveling. Don't have to wait. Don't have to worry."

"I know."

"We can take all day and all night if necessary. Andrew. Like Andrew. Stays so late. Always stays so late. Until morning."

"Yes."

"Show me. Whatever you show him. Show me. But, more so. The interconnectedness of all things. I understand. I want to understand it all."

"And, you will. I assure you. You will."



Suburban streets. Trees and roadways. Lawns and driveways. Manicured. Growing. Roads drawn in drunken straight lines, curving ever so slightly this way and that until eventually turning around and doubling back on each other. Hidden maze of streets and pathways. Never noticed until lost upon them. Driving. This way and that. Stopping. Looking at maps. Glancing at street signs through half-open windows. Driving on. Another street. Then another. Tall houses. Wide. Narrow. Presenting the longest face to the road. Making them appear greater than they were. One step removed from false fronts. Henry and Andrew drove. Looking. Consulting notes. Roads dipped and swayed. Curling back upon themselves so much like a Mobius strip. Nobody about in the afternoon light. Weekday. Children still in school. Parents at work. Maybe the mailman about.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

One road. One path out of all the others. Suddenly, separate. Fewer and fewer houses as if they were growing wary of each other. Larger yards. Greater collections of trees and unkempt bushes. Fewer mowed lawns. More weeds. Another turn. Another dip. Sidewalk disappearing somewhere behind them. Fences where there had been open space before. Growing old. Decrepit. Falling to pieces. Covered in moss and earth. Clumps of mushrooms. Fewer leaves on trees. Branches drooping. Dangling. Dry. Like the husks of once growing things that could no longer stand in the sun. Andrew drove, watching faded street numbers. Roadside mailboxes fallen into disrepair. Stopping before one driveway. House far back from the road. Looking empty. Looking forlorn. Looking as if the windows had once been halfheartedly boarded up. Rusted. Molded. Fallen away. Leaving gaps. Leaving openings where there had once been gateways and barriers. And yet, looking strangely nondescript half-hidden and far back from the road as if the world itself were trying to hide this one house out of all the others from view.

They drove on, following the street. Turning another corner. Stopping the car. Letting it idle. Finally, killing the engine. They sat, unmoving. Finally, Henry began folding the map. Andrew went around to the back. Began taking out shoulder bags. Backpack. Plastic milk cartons. Utility belts. Hammer. Flashlights. Crowbar. Rawhide gloves. Padded jackets looking vaguely like reworked motorcycle riding gear. Henry joined him. Carrying a crucifix longer than his forearm. Carved like a storybook woodcut engraving.

Andrew shouldered the backpack. Dawning gloves. Holding the crowbar. Henry taking a shoulder bag. Crucifix in his hand. They began to walk cross-country back toward the one house. Finding a gap in the ancient fence. Approaching the side of the house as if they could still veer back toward the road. As if they were simply lost and had finally noticed it again. Stopped by the side. Under a window. Listening to the whispered sound of a car on the road. Waited. Watching. Listening. The wind drifting as if it could not muster the energy to brush through the leaves. They waited. Nothing happened. And, they began to move. Working

Pyrrhic Kingdom

around to the back. Crossing behind the house. Looking for windows. Living rooms. Dens. Covered back patios.

The house was old. Decrepit. As if it had forgotten how to live. Smell of damp earth. Rotten leaves. Dense vegetation that had grown old. No sound but the quiet passing of their own footfalls. They waited by a side door. Nothing happened. Stark wood. Faded colors. Like bone that had been left out in the cold. And, nothing happened. They tried the door. Used the crowbar. Hammer. Forced the door. Stood waiting. Not entering. And, nothing happened. They entered. Andrew holding a flashlight. Henry brandishing the crucifix like a torch. Stale air. Breath so still it didn't even move as they passed. Found a pantry. Passage to a garage. Kitchen. View of a small dining room. All but empty spaces. Hollow rooms. As if all the furniture had been removed and random items had begun to fill the space. Growing out of the void. Taking shape. Here. There. Abhorring a vacuum. Papers on the floor. Upside-down coffee pot on the counter. Tissue box on the table. Chair on its side.

They moved through the house. Slowly. Methodically. Living room. Dining room. Den. Bed rooms. Bathrooms. Alcoves. Returning to the living room. Looking at the nearly empty spaces. Trash drifting as if formed from ghosts and whispers. They stood. Andrew with his hand on his hip. Head bent. Eyes for the ground. Saying nothing. Henry watching him. Holding the crucifix as if it might slip through his fingers. Put down the shoulder bag. Rum-maged through it. Found a canteen. Took a slow drink. Found Andrew watching him. Held out the canteen. Andrew shaking his head slowly. Henry walked around his bag as if he did not want to touch it. Circling slowly. Turned. Facing the room. Looking. Tapping the canteen. At last, returned it to the bag. Lifted the shoulder bag back over his arm. Walked back through the house. Andrew following.

Started in the master bedroom. Worked his way forward. Stopped at one bedroom. Checking the closet. Searching the floor. Found the trapdoor. Swept it with his hands. Andrew watching. Notch in the wood. Covered with dirt and dust. Cleared space for fingers to lift the door.

The room took a breath as if it could not breathe. They stag-

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gered back. Henry almost falling. Andrew turning almost running. Standing still. Henry scuttling backward. Away from the door. Holding the crucifix as if it was an ax. They stood. Watching. Waiting. Listening to silence. Groaning wind. Distant fog. Nothing. And, nothing happened. They watched the wood. They studied the door. And, nothing happened. Creaking boards of a house settling back to sleep.

Henry muttering. Trying not to speak. Not even words. Speaking nonsense to himself that might someday form words if he should but try. Put down the shoulder bag. Andrew letting the backpack fall. Henry had a carton of salt from the bag. Walked slowly back toward the trapdoor. Began pouring salt. Forming a half-circle. And, nothing happened. Andrew had a folding drinks holder. Four-pack. Small cartons. Found a short rod wrapped and bundled in cloth like a makeshift torch. Thought he heard the whispering of voices dragged across the floor. Henry froze. Standing beside the door. Standing within the half-circle of salt. Watching the door. Crucifix in his hand.

Voices drifting. Mutterings wafting like a twist of moth-worn gossamer thread on the wind. He reached down. Slowly. Pausing as the whispers echoed. Reached down. Touched the door. Fingers moving over the trapdoor. Voices like a conversation. Strangers looking for a light. Grabbed the hook. Thumbed it. Pulled. Door shifted. House groaned. Pulled with a sudden jerk. Slipping. Door flying as if alive. Across the floor. Scattering the salt all to hell.

Henry rolled. Andrew grabbing. Pulling. Crying. Screaming. Hands grasped from the pit. Limbs spun. Wood rattled. Room shook. Fingers sought. Touched random grains of salt. Flailed as if shocked. Distant screams like laughing children. Hiss like burning steam. Stench of decaying, desiccated wood. Breath like damp moss and rotten mud. Rumbling out of the hole. Wind roaring like a bellows. Flowing in and out of the hole.

"Mother of God!" Henry said. "Mercy, Mother of God!" Lying on his back. Staring at the hole. Flailing limbs. Thrashing hands.

The floor shook as if something had hit it. Something trying desperately to fit through the hole.

Andrew found the salt carton. On its side. Near the hole. Took

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it. Watching limbs pinwheel. Shook the carton. Pulled at the top. Ripped it. Threw salt. Scattered salt. Voices screamed. Hands shrieked. Fingers fluttered like mad windmills.

"Oh, Father who are in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name," Andrew whispered. "Your Kingdom come. Your will be done. I stand in the valley of shadow. I shall fear none because you are with me."

Claws reached for him. Andrew screamed, crawling backward. Henry on his knees, searching for the crucifix. Finding nothing. Fingers slipping. Sliding over the old floor. Andrew reached the bags. Rummaged for one of the drink bottles without looking. Eyes locked on the hole. As if he could not turn. As if he could not see. Hole breathing like a mouth. As if alive. Limbs twisting and flailing. Stretching. Reaching. Touching nothing. Voices breathing fire like asthmatic children. Pigs. And, kittens. The floor shifting as if covered in a fine layer of dust. Shifting as if everything was slowly tilting, sliding, toward the hole.

Found a drinks carton. Dragged it to his feet. Henry had the crucifix. Somewhere. Muttering. Trying not to breathe. Andrew broke the seal. Stuffed a bit of cloth. Dug in his pockets. Struggling. As if he did not want to stand. Pulled out a lighter. Got the cloth lit. Sputtering flames. Half-rolled. Half-tossed the bottle toward the hole. Watched it vanish between fingers and limbs. Nothing happened. As if they did not notice. Could not notice. Reaching. Striking. Flailing blind.

"Though I walk through the very shadow of death, I shall fear no evil," Henry said, muttering. Whispering. As if his voice refused to work. "For the Lord is with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

Pigs and chickens hissed with an open mouthed growl. Guttural. Choking. Fingers clinging to the walls. Grasping the floor. Holding on for dear life.

"Hallowed be thy name," Andrew said, holding another bottle. "Thy will be done. Your Kingdom come." Broke the seal. "Father in Heaven!" Fire to cloth. Tossed the bottle. It hit one of the limbs. Shattered. Spewing flame. Screams of dying angels woken suddenly in the night. The wall aflame.

Henry had a bottle in his hands. Broken seal. Cloth. Held out

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to Andrew. Lighter to flame. Henry threw it. Watched fire grow. Limbs withered. Shrank back. Burning. Alight with flickering laughter. Another bottle pulled from the shoulder bag. Much larger. They wrapped a towel around it. Stabbed with a knife. Boards creaking. Rumbling. Andrew and Henry pushed it, rolling toward the hole. It sputtered. Took flame. Spreading fire. Swarming the fingers and limbs.

They sat, watching. As if they could not move. Heat on their faces. Fire in their eyes. Watching. Shrieks and laughter. Andrew stood. Turned. Pulled Henry up behind him. Walked slowly toward the door. Watching fire. Dancing flame. Hugging the wall as far from the closet, fire and slick darkness as he could manage. Stopped as if dragging against mud. Leaning against the wall. Looked. Turned. Henry behind him. Looked at the floor. Henry saying nothing.

Andrew pushed him. Halfheartedly. As if he did not know what he was doing. Henry stood still. Arms at his sides. As if he might fall but did nothing. Andrew watched the floor. As if lost. Shoved Henry. Hard. Pushing. Henry staggering back. Forming words as if he might speak. Andrew grabbed his arms. Tried to push him. Throw him. Force him toward the fire. Henry staggering back. Arms. Hands wide. Andrew lunged. Crashed together. Tumbled to the floor. Tried to stand. Tried to get away. Henry reaching. Grasping. Slipping on empty air.

Watched Andrew reach the backpack. Run for the door. Henry found his feet. Struggling after Andrew. Found the door closed. Pulled. Andrew holding from the other side. Pulled, again. The door held. Pulled again. Door wouldn't move. Something. Something from the backpack. That could wedge a door against pursuing monsters and demons. Applied quickly. Hooks and elastic cords. Henry pulled again. Nothing. And, nothing happened.

Hammered on the door. Hammered and roared. Turned. Half the room in flame. The creature's tendrils withering. Lost. Forgotten. Henry staggered, slipping, along the wall. Looking. Searching. The shoulder bag. The crowbar. Flame. Bare walls. Tried to reach the bag. Tried to step into the room. The very air hot to his touch. Reached the bag. The crowbar. Made his way to the wall. The windows. Boarded. Covered. Swung the crowbar. Smashing

Pyrrhic Kingdom

Dropped it as if it burned. Gulped air. Breathing fire. Spun in a circle. The house behind him. Had hardly chased after Henry at all. As if he had shuffled drunkenly forward while Henry had run. As if he could not force himself to move. Aim. Fire the gun. Disconnected. All disconnected.

The house was burning. Flames visible through the roof, reaching for the sky as if they longed for the taste of branches, dry leaves and brittle trees. Ached for the sky. Hungered for freedom. Dancing. Forever dancing.

People would come. Eventually, people would notice smoke and flame. Fireman would come. Policemen would follow. Andrew turned around. Again and again. As if lost. As if searching. Seeking. Seeing nothing. Empty woods. Not woods. Suburban neighborhood. Spartan. Distant. Might as well be woods. But, surrounded by other houses and homes. Just over the rise. Just around the bend in the road. The real world all around him. Hidden.

Andrew moved as if his body did not work properly. All but lunging. All but at random. Knowing the car was beyond the burning home. Stopped. Staggered to a close. Turned. Searched the ground. Looking. Seeking. Found the gun. Scooped it up. Ran. Looking a wounded thing. Limping. For the car. Found the car. Drove.



Henry realized that he did not have any money. Nothing more than his ID. Next of kin contact information.



Andrew entered the conservatory. Marching the long walk through the front entrance used by visitors and tourists and curiosity seekers. The guard saw him from his discrete desk. Recognition. Came half-way to his feet. Saw the others with Andrew. Sat back down. Watched them pass.

Andrew entered the main hall. Scanning the rows of tables. Didn't bother to count the people. If there were people. Looked to the long desk. Beth was watching him. Reading glasses all but

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falling from her nose. Looking as if she would stand. As if she would speak. But, nothing. Watching him. Rebecca had her face down. As if studying the books and records hidden on the counter. Hidden on her side of the long desk. Invisible to visitors or the curious. She had looked. At the sounds of marching feet. People entering by the door. But, she had looked down. As if busy. As if figuring that he was there to speak with Beth. But, she was not looking. Pretending she had not noticed. Feigning disinterest.

Andrew walked right up to her. Standing on the visitor's side of the desk. She did not look up. As if engrossed. As if convinced his was a momentary pause. Any second he would turn to Elizabeth.

"Rebecca," he said. Raised her eyes over her side of the desk. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"What?" Beth said as if it was the only word she could muster. Dying on her breath.

Rebecca did not say anything. Her hands on the counter. Her eyes drifting. Everywhere but his face. Anywhere but matching his gaze.

"Rebecca, is there anywhere we may talk in private?"

"You can." Found his eyes. Looked away. "You can tell me here."

"Privacy would be best."

"I'm not ashamed. I'll need." Hands were fists. Eyes turning pale. "Friends will see me grieve whether you tell me in private or not."

"Privacy."

Beth was standing at Rebecca's side. Glasses in her hand. Twisted in her fist.

"I'm not afraid." Rebecca matched his gaze.

"It would be best."

"Just tell her, Andrew," Beth said. "Henry's not with you. How exactly is privacy going to soften the blow?"

Rebecca gulped air as if she would throw up. Held her lips firm. Fists pressed to the counter. Watching him. Eyes drifting. Looking back. Watching him.

"Privacy."

They faced him in stoney silence.

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"Henry's not dead."

Rebecca cried out. No words. Never words. Just a sound. Like an explosion. Pride preventing degeneration into sobs.

"If that's what." His voice. Faltering. Drifting. "If that's. What you thought."

"Then, why?" Beth's hand on Rebecca's shoulder.

"I need to ask you some questions." Locked on Rebecca.

"What?"

"I don't."

"In private," Andrew said. "I need information, and I think it would be best if I asked you in private."

"I don't." Looking lost and alone. "Understand."

"Please, is there somewhere we can talk?"

"She'll need." Beth said, faltering. "Is this really necessary?"

"Alone."

"I suppose. One of the offices." Looking across the room. Beth looking anywhere but toward Rebecca.

"That will do." Began to make his way along the counter. Toward the staff door. The others following. Except for Jason. Standing before the counter. Facing Beth. Rebecca. Turning to glance across the room.

Rebecca rose, sliding from her stool more than standing. Beth reaching. Not touching. Twisted reading glasses in her hand. They watched Andrew standing by the staff door. Looking as if he would simply pass through to the other side without waiting. As if he assumed they would follow.

"You should wait here," Jason said, which seemed to surprise them more than anything.

Beth moved as if to speak. Words failing her. As if she had forgotten what words meant. Rebecca took a step. Without turning. Without looking. Following after Andrew and the others. She lead them through the door. Down the stairs. Past the kitchen. Break-room. Offices. Unused offices. Chose one. Door standing open. Crossed to a chair pushed against a desk. Facing the wall. Andrew closed the door. The others with him.

"Where is he?" Andrew said, watching her.

Rebecca said nothing, looking at him as if she did not understand English.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Sit," he said.

Rebecca placed her hand on the back of the chair, facing them.

"Where is he?"

"I don't. Understand."

"Where is Henry?" Stepping toward her. "Where is your husband?"

"I don't." Gripping the chair. "He was with you."

"Yes, he was with me." Stepping. "But, he isn't any more." Standing. "Where is he?"

"I don't. Know."

"You don't. Know."

"No."

"No?" Towering.

"That's. I don't. He was with you."

"Yes, he was."

"I don't." Looking past Andrew. Seeing Patrick and Jonathan standing by the door. Grim faces. "Why are you asking? I don't understand. He was with. Why would you be asking? Why would I know?"

They said nothing. Patrick and Jonathan sharing a look as if they did not think anyone would notice. Andrew in her face. Standing over her. Looking down. Rebecca slipping into the chair.

"I don't know, Rebecca," he said. Standing so close. She had to crane her neck. "He's your husband. Why wouldn't you know where he is?"

"He's with you. He's at the club. He's always with you at the club."

"Yes, he was."

"I don't. Stop saying that. Why do you keep saying. Where is he? What's happened to my husband?"

"That's what I want to know?"

"What? I don't."

"What happened to your husband."

"I don't."

"What happened to your husband, Rebecca? Tell me what happened to your husband."

"I don't. Nothing. Nothing happened to my husband."

"Is that what you want us to think?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"What?"

"Or do you not know?"

"Please."

"Where is he, Rebecca?"

"He was with you."

"Yes, he was."

"Stop saying that!"

"Where is he?"

"I don't. Why?"

"Do you want to know why?"

"No."

"Do you really want to know why?"

"Please."

"Do you not know?"

"I don't."

"Do you really not know?"

"Where is he? What happened to my husband?"

"He tried to kill me, Rebecca. That's what happened to your husband."

"No!"

"Oh, yes."

"You're lying."

"Afraid not."

"That's impossible."

"He did, Rebecca! I wish. Oh, I wish it weren't true, but he did."

"No."

"He did, Rebecca."

"No, impossible."

"But, true."

"That's not him."

"It is."

"That's what you do."

Hit her. Back of his hand. Didn't cry out. Slumped in the chair. Gripping it. The others did not move. He touched her face. She did not move. Fingers caressing her chin. And, the others did not move.

"Where is he?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom



"Did you hear?"
"Tried to kill him."
"My God!"
"Tried to kill him."
"Happening all over again."



"What do we do?"
"Tried to kill him."
"For speaking out? For asking questions?"
"I don't know. Nobody knows."
"My God!"
"What if he's starting to silence people?"
"My God!"
"After what he did to Douglas and Maribeth."
"My God!"
"What do we do?"
"We have to tell people."
"He'll kill us!"
"What's stopping him?"



"What are we going to do, Jonathan?"
"I don't know. Try to get ahold of Henry, I guess."
"What?"
"Well, we need to know what happened."
"How can you say that?"
"We don't even have half a story."
"We know everything we need."
"I don't know."
"What?"
"You haven't heard."
"What?"
"You haven't heard half the things I have."
"Well, what does it matter?"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

out as if guiding her through the door. Toward a shower that was barely big enough for two.



He made her face the wall. Water flowing all around them. Made her press her hands flat against the shower wall. He made her stand, leaning forward. Hands against the wall. Water hot as he could stand it. He did not give her time to prepare. He was ready. No time to prepare. Nothing to make it easier other than the water flowing all over and around them. Pressed against the shower wall.



"Helen, what is it?"

"Nothing. He is here."

"No, he mustn't." Held out her hand as if catching herself against the door. "I'm sorry. We can make do." Crossed into the foyer. Helen closing the door. "What stage?"

"He's with the others. The ritual has started."

"I see."

"It will be some time. He was in quite a mood."

"I know. Unreceptive. No condition for the ritual."

"Yes."

"I don't need to know what was required."

"It was." Began walking toward the far rooms. "Unpleasant."

"For all concerned, I'm sure."

Walked down the corridor without looking back.

"You should have seen him." Following. "The way he treated Becky. At the conservatory. Horrible." Past the hanging screen. The first turn. Looking. She could hear the ceremony. Taste lavender and rosewood. Cloves and thyme. "Just horrible."

They sat opposite ends of a small bed. Across from a table. Vials and glasses. Mirror. Chairs.

"It has not gone well for him."

"No, it hasn't. Not what I wanted. Not what I wanted at all." Eyes on the wall. As if she could see through it. "Just wanted him to be safe. Wanted him to be happy."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"He couldn't have just disappeared. We're watching Rebecca. He's made no effort to contact her."

"None."

"Words gone out."

"Yes."

"Why haven't we heard anything?"

"Give it time. Word just went out yesterday."

"He has to contact someone. Interact with someone."

"Word will get back to us."

"He'll reach out. Try to contact someone."

Shrug of shoulders.

"We have to know," Andrew said. "Who is loyal?"

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"It's getting bad."

"No."

"Going to get very bad."

"What are we going to do, Jonathan?"

"I don't know. He's starting to doubt."

"What?"

"Everybody."

"No."

"He'll start to question. Talking. Just talking."

"Paranoia."

"Will it be safe? Just talking?"

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"Any word from Henry?"

"No, of course not."

"Reports flow through Andrew's office, but Henry may still try to contact someone."

"Let us hope not."

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"He killed them."

"What?"

"Douglas and Maribeth. He killed them."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"The duel."

"There was no duel. He killed them. I was there."

"My God!"

"Made us swear."



"No sign of Becky?" Silence. "Not really a big surprise, I suppose. Really should go visit her." Silence dragged. Beth sipped her coffee. "Please talk to me, Emma. Everything's going so wrong."

"They beat her."

"What?"

"Tried to kill her husband. Beat her. Find out where he is."

"Oh, no."

"Saw the bruises. You saw the bruises."

"There was one."

"Oh, we're counting them now?"

"It wasn't right, but he was angry."

"Really?"

"Her husband had just tried to kill him. Wasn't thinking straight."

"Excuses."

"He said he was sorry."

"Not to her."



"There's nothing left for me."

"It's okay, Elizabeth."

"They all hate me. Guilt by association."

"I'm sure it's nothing that bad."

"Andrew's fault. It's all Andrew's fault."

"Surely."

"Never should have rocked the boat. Asked so many questions. Never would have been pushed out into the field."

"It's the calling."

"Calling. There's so much I can learn."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

"We have to push, Jonathan. These societies. One of these secret societies."

"Millennial?"

"Yes, he must be working with one of these Revelation cults. Out to get us. They're all out to get us."



"Andrew killed them."

"What? What are you saying?"

"Douglas and Maribeth. Andrew murdered them in their bed."

"My God!"

"I can hardly believe. Arthur told me. Heard it from Marcus."

"My God!"

"Paul and then Henry. Has anyone heard from Henry? Is he even alive?"



"What if something's happened to Henry?"

"What?"

"What if Andrew murdered Henry? Just like Douglas? Like Paul?"

"My God!"

"What if Andrew is saying Henry tried to kill him and fled to cover up the murder?"

"What are you saying?"

"Has anyone heard from Henry?"

"No."

"Rumors? Anything?"



"No word! No nothing!"

"We're trying."

"It's like he vanished off the face of the earth!"

"If he's out there, we'll find him."

"Unless someone is protecting him."

"Surely."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"He's going home."

"What?"

"Henry is going home. He going for his gun."

"No."

"Oh, yes. Making arrangements. Trying to sneak in. Doesn't want to put anyone else at risk by bringing it to him."

"How can you know this?"

"I have sources."

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"Something's happening."

"What?"

"Andrew claims to know where Henry is."

"My God!"

"Or where he will be, anyway."

"How?"

"I don't know. I don't understand."

"What are we going to do?"

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"Is it true?"

"Nobody has heard from Maribeth."

"How could it be true?"

"Nobody has seen Maribeth."

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Long couch. Reclining chairs. Living room. They sat around a coffee table. Andrew. Jonathan. David. Jason. Cups before them. Unnoticed. Untouched. Rebecca in one chair. Ridged as a board. Staring at the fireplace. Empty. Cold.

"Are you sure he's coming?"

"Yes."

"He must know we're waiting."

"Why?"

"We would have the place watched. Surely. He would. In our position."

"I suppose."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"The primordial void from which God created the heaven and the earth. Wouldn't it still be there?"

"How can you know this?"

Her eyes drifted from the wall, taking her time about it. Moving slowly. As if she could barely register that Andrew was there. Standing at her chair. Towering over her. Looked into his eyes.

"Maribeth told me."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why would it be impossible?"

"She's in seclusion! Doesn't speak to anybody in her grief!"

"Of course."

"She could not have told you!"

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know! She doesn't speak to anyone!"

"Never a note? Never a message?"

"Never!"

"So sure are you."

Looking around. The other's locked on him.

"I am first," he whispered. "I would know."

"Would you know when? Automatically know when? Divine right or something?"

"Yes, I would know if she contacted you."

"So you would know if she had told me months ago? Or years?"

Silence.

"Why so sure it would have to be now?"

"I don't. You didn't say."

"I suppose."

"Doesn't matter. Why would she tell you? How would she know?"

"That I couldn't tell you."

"Did she tell you more?"

"I suppose."

"What?"

"Not important right now."

"Tell me!"

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"You just told me not to."

"Who else did she tell?"

"I don't know. Douglas, I suppose. Or possibly he told her. Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does actually. Did she tell Henry?"

"No, I did that."

"Madness. It can spread like a disease. Conspiracy." Looking about the room. "Who told Maribeth?" Facing Rebecca. "How did she know?"



"Gentlemen," Rebecca said, standing. Looking over them as if they were children. "It's late. I'm going to bed."

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're all staying right here."

"Then at least let me tend to necessities or do you really wish me to piss myself right here?"

"Go with her." Waiving a hand indiscriminately toward the others.

"How very chivalrous."



"Thank you," Rebecca said, standing by the hallway. Facing the living room once again. "I am refreshed. But there really is an end to hospitality. And a point at which guests have most definitely overstayed their welcome."

"Regrettable, we really must impose a while longer."

"Why?"

"We are staying."

"There really is no point, you know. I didn't want to impose on your tactics, but I did think it quite silly that you all stayed in the living room."

"What? The door."

"Oh, yes. You wouldn't know, would you? And I certainly didn't see any point in telling you."

"What?" On his feet. Facing her.

Pyrrhic Kingdom

Andrew laughed, covering his face with his hand. Rubbing at his eyes.

"Doesn't matter, does it?" Looked at Henry. "Well? Come on. What are you waiting for?"



"So much to accomplish," Henry said, looking over the long table with its warped conflagration of papers and reports. Turning. Looking to Jonathan. "I never wanted to be first."

"Do you think there'll be any trouble?"

"If nobody reports him missing, Andrew will simply slip away. Vanish. Nobody will notice. Nobody will care."

"Police none the wiser."

"Maribeth, too, I fear."

"The company will know."

"Lucky few."

"I was wondering."

"Yes?"

"Did Maribeth really tell your wife all those things?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Surely."

"It's just speculation, Jonathan. We are the rightfully appointed instrument of God's justice. All that matters."

"Where?"

"Yes?"

"How could she know such things?"

"I really don't know. Douglas told her, I suppose."

"I suppose."

"Funny."

"What?"

"I wasn't expecting. Just sitting. Thinking. Not even, really. Just soaking up the familiar. Wondering what to do. Then, Andrew. What was he doing there at that hour?"

"I don't. He hardly goes home any more."

"Mysteries of the universe."



Pyrrhic Kingdom

Henry paused as he entered the great room with its sunken couches and view of the city. Beth was seated at one end of the long couch, wearing cream and white robes resembling so much a nightgown.

"You may call me Katherine, if you like," Beth said. "Or Kate, if familiarity makes you more comfortable."

"Katherine?" he said, pointing a finger in the direction of the young woman who had greeted him at the door.

"Oh, don't worry, we're not all the same person displaced by time. No, wait. From different times all pulled together. Standing next to each other. Something like that." Shrug of shoulders. "We are all separate individual people." Patted the couch next to her. "Sit."

He crossed the room slowly. Chose a cushion toward the other end of the couch facing her. Sat looking at his hands. Brushed fingers down his pant leg.

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"What?"

"It matters not. We're all one. After a fashion, of course."

Caught. Breath in his throat. Feeling that he might die.

"It's quite all right, Henry. I knew this would happen."

Looked at her.

"Well, I know. Not all along. But, I learned. They taught me. Showed me that everything happened for a reason. Everything happened for the best."

"I'll assign." Could not look at her. "I'll find someone to be the liaison. First of the company shouldn't be too close to the ladies. That is clear."

"From Andrew's example. Yes, I understand."

"It may take some time. Expectations. People have so many expectations. Preconceived. Prejudices about the ladies."

"Yes."

"I may have to assign temporarily. Imperfect fit. Until I can identify just the right person."

"There are those among us." Waived her hand languidly. Airily. "Who enjoy exceeding expectations. Making fools of those who think they have power over us."

Pyrrhic Kingdom

"Beth." Saw the smile in her eyes. "Katherine."

"Yes?"

"You will be taken care of. I'll see to that."

"I know."

"I promise."

"Thank you."

"It's a sacred trust." Moved as if he would stand. "I think we've forgotten. So easy to forget. Mouthing pretty words. They're not just words."

"Never just words."

"We must renew our commitment to God. Be better than we have been. Better than frightened turkeys crushing the center. Scared of the dark."

"Noble sentiment."

"They haven't feared us. The creatures. Despoilers of God's creation. They haven't feared us like they used to." Stood as if the interview was over. "They will."

Also by Keith D. Jones

The Etymology of Fire (2004)

The Magic Flute (1999)

*The Faire Folk of Gideon: Pin the
Tail on the Donkey* (2001)