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Sacrament

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EvervilleThe Thief of Always

Imajica The Great and Secret Show

The Hellbound Heart

The Books of Blood, Volumes I-III

In the Flesh

The Inhuman Condttum

The Damnation Game

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—THE RECONCILIATION—

IMAJICA II

CLIVE BARKER

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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1991 by HarperCollins Publishers. A single volume edition of *Imajica* was published in 1992 by HarperPaperbacks.

First HarperPaperbacks printing: June 1995 Cover illustration by Jim Burns Printed in the United States of America

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Back and back we go, searching for reasons; scrutinizing the past in the hope that we'll turn up some fragment of an explanation to help us better understand ourselves and our condition.

For the psychologist, this quest is perhaps at root a pursuit of primal pain. For the physicist, a sniffing after evidence of the First Cause. For the theologian, of course, a hunt for God's fingerprints on Creation.

And for a storyteller—particularly for a fabulist, a writer of fantastiques like myself—it may very well be a search for all three, motivated by the vague suspicion that they are inextricably linked.

Imajica was an attempt to weave these quests into a single narrative, folding my dilettante's grasp of this trio of disciplines—psychology, physics, and theology—into an interdimensional adventure. The resulting novel sprawls, no doubt of that. The book is simply too cumbersome and too diverse in its concerns for the tastes of some. For others, however, *Imajica's* absurd ambition is part of its appeal. These readers forgive the inelegance of the novel's structure and allow that while it undoubtedly has its rocky roads and its cul-de-sacs, all in all the journey is worth the shoe-leather.

For my publishers, however, a more practical problem became apparent when the book was prepared

for its paperback edition. If the volume was not to be so thick that it would drop off a bookstore shelf, then the type had to be reduced to a size that several people, myself included, thought less than ideal. When I received my author's copies I was put in mind of a pocket-sized Bible my grandmother gave me for my eighth birthday, the words set so densely that the verses swam before my then healthy eyes. It was not—I will admit—an entirely unpleasant association, given that the roots of *Imajica's* strange blossom lay in the

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poetry of Ezekiel, Matthew, and Revelations, but I was well aware, as were my editors, that the book was not as reader-friendly as we all wished it was.

From those early misgivings springs this new, two-volume edition. Let me admit, in all honesty, that the book was not conceived to be thus divided. The place we have elected to split the story has no particular significance. It is simply halfway through the text, or thereabouts: a spot where you can put down one volume and—if the story has worked its magic—pick up the next. Other than the large type, and the addition of these words of explanation, the novel itself remains unaltered.

Personally, I've never much cared about the details of one edition over another. While it's very pleasurable to turn the pages of a beautifully bound book, immaculately printed on acid-free paper, the words are what count. The first copy of Foe's short stories I ever read was a cheap, gaudily covered paperback; my first *Moby Dick* the same. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Duchess of Malfi* were first encountered in dog-eared school editions. It mattered not at all that these enchantments were printed on coarse, stained paper. Their potency was undimmed. I hope the same will prove true for the tale you now hold: that the form it comes in is finally irrelevant.

With that matter addressed, might I delay you a little longer with a few thoughts about the story itself? At signings and conventions I am repeatedly asked a number of questions about the book, and this seems as good a place as any to briefly answer them.

Firstly, the question of pronunciation. *Imajica* is full of invented names and terms, some of which are puzzlers: Yzorddorex, Patashoqua, Hapexamendios, and so forth. There is no absolute hard and fast rule as to how these should trip, or stumble, off the tongue. After all, I come from a very small country where you can hike over a modest range of hills and find that the people you encounter on the far side use language in a completely different way to those whose company you left minutes before. There is no right or wrong in this. Language isn't a fascist regime. It's

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protean, and effortlessly defies all attempts to regulate or confine it. While it's true that I have my own pronunciations of the words I've turned in the book, even those undergo modifications when—as has happened several times—people I meet offer more interesting variations. A book belongs at least as much to its readers as to its author, so please find the way the words sound most inviting to you and take pleasure in them.

The other matter I'd like to address is my motivation for writing the novel. Of course there is no simple, encapsulated answer to that question, but I will offer here what clues I can. To begin with, I have an abiding interest in the notion of parallel dimensions, and the influence they may exercise over the lives we live in this world. I don't doubt that the reality we occupy is but one of many; that a lateral step would deliver us into a place quite other. Perhaps our lives are also going on in these other dimensions, changed

in vast or subtle ways. Or perhaps these other places will be unrecognizable to us: they'll be realms of spirit, or wonderlands, or hells. Perhaps all of the above. *Imajica* is an attempt to create a narrative which explores those possibilities.

It is also a book about Christ. People are constantly surprised that the figure of Jesus is of such importance to me. They look at *The Hellbound Heart* or at some of the stories in *The Books of Blood* and take me for a pagan who views Christianity as a pretty distraction from the business of suffering and dying. There is some truth in this. I certainly find the hypocritical cant and derisive dogmas of organized religion grotesque and oftentimes inhumane. Plainly the Vatican, for instance, cares more for its own authority than for the planet and the flock that grazes upon it. But the mythology that is still barely visible beneath the centuries-old encrustation of power plays and rituals—the story of Jesus the crucified and resurrected; the shaman healer who walked on water and raised Lazarus—is as moving to me as any story I have ever heard.

I found Christ as I found Dionysus or Coyote, through art. Blake showed him to me; so did Bellini and Gerard

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Manley Hopkins, and half a hundred others, each artist offering his or her own particular interpretation. And from very early on I wanted to find a way to write about Jesus myself; to fold his presence into a story of my own invention. It proved difficult. Most *fantastique* fiction has drawn inspiration from a pre-Christian world, retrieving from Faery, or Atlantis, or dreams of a Celtic twilight creatures that never heard of Communion. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but it always left me wondering if these authors weren't willfully denying their Christian roots out of frustration or disappointment. Having had no religious education, I harbored no such disappointment: I was drawn to the Christ figure as I was to Pan or Shiva, because the stories and images enlightened and enriched me. Christ is, after all, the central figure of Western mythology. I wanted to feel that my self-created pantheon could accommodate him, that my inventions were not too brittle to bear the weight of his presence.

I was further motivated by a desire to snatch this most complex and contradictory mystery from the clammy hands of the men who have claimed it for their own in recent years, especially here in America. The Falwells and the Robertsons, who, mouthing piety and sowing hatred, use the Bible to justify their plots against our self-discovery. Jesus does not belong to them. And it pains me that many imaginative people are so persuaded by these claims to possession that they turn their backs on the body of Western mysticism instead of *reclaiming* Christ for themselves. I said in an interview once (and meant it) that the Pope, or Falwell, or a thousand others, may announce that God talks to them, instructs them, shows them the Grand Plan, but that the Creator talks to me just as loudly, just as cogently, through the images and ideas He, She, or It has seeded in my imagination.

That said, I must tell you that the deeper I got into writing *Imajica*, the more certain I became that completing it was beyond me. I have never come closer to giving up as I came on this book, never doubted more deeply my skills as a storyteller, was never more lost, never more afraid. But

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nor was I ever more obsessed. I became so thoroughly immersed in the narrative that for a period of several weeks toward the end of the final draft a kind of benign insanity settled upon me. I woke from dreams of the Dominion only to write about them until I crept back to bed to dream them again. My ordinary life—what little I had—came to seem banal and featureless by contrast with what was

happening to me—I should say Gentle, but I *mean* me—as we made our journey toward revelation. It's no accident that the book was finished as I prepared to leave England for America. By the time I came to write the final pages my house in Wimpole Street had been sold, its contents boxed up and sent on to Los Angeles, so that all I had that I took comfort in had gone from around me. It was in some ways a perfect way to finish the novel: like Gentle, I was embarking on another kind of life, and in so doing leaving the country in which I had spent almost forty years. In a sense, *Imajica* became a compendium of locations I had known and felt strongly about: Highgate and Crouch End, where I had spent a decade or more, writing plays, then short stories, then *Weave World*; Central London, where I lived for a little time in a splendid Georgian house. There on the page I put the summers of my childhood, and my fantasies of aristocracy. I put my love of a peculiar English apocalyptic: the visions of Stanley Spencer and John Martin and William Blake, dreams of domestic resurrection and Christ upon the doorstep some summer morning. Gamut Street I placed in Clerkenwell, which has always seemed haunted to me. The scenes with the returned Gentle I set on the South Bank, where I had spent many blissful evenings. In short, the book became my farewell to England.

I do not discount the possibility that I will one day return there, of course, but for now, in the smog and sun of Los Angeles, that world seems very remote. It's extraordinary how divided it can make you feel, having been brought up in one country and coming to live in another. For a writer such as myself, who is much concerned with journeys into the strange, and the melancholia and joy of such journeys, it's proved an educative experience.

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I offer these scraps of biography in the hope that they illuminate the story that follows, and that some of the feelings that brought me to this novel will be left with you when it's finished. Christ and England have not left my heart of course—they never will—but writing about a subject works an extraordinary magic. It magnifies the passions that inspired the story, and then—with the work finished—buries them, out of sight and mind, so as to allow the writer to move on to another place. I still dream of England, now and then, and I last wrote of Jesus walking on Quiddity's waters in *Everville*, telling Tesla Bombeck that "lives are leaves on the story-tree." But I will never again feel about them as I did when I wrote *Imajica*. Those particular forms and emotions have disappeared into the pages, to be rediscovered there by somebody who wants to find them. If it pleases you to do so, make them your own.

Clive Barker Los Angeles, 1994

-THE RECONCILIATION-

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I

like the theater districts of so many great cities across the *Imajica*, whether in Reconciled Dominions or in the Fifth, the neighborhood in which the *Ipse* stood had been a place of some notoriety in earlier times, when actors of both sexes had supplemented their wages with the old five-acter—hiring, retiring, seduction, conjunction, and remittance—all played hourly, night and day. The center of these activities had moved away, however, to the other side of the city, where the burgeoning numbers of middle-class clients felt less exposed to the gaze of their peers out seeking more respectable entertainment. Lickerish Street and its environs had sprung up in a matter of months and quickly became the third richest Kesparate in the city, leaving the theater district to decline into legitimacy.

Perhaps because it was of so little interest to people, it had survived the traumas of the last few hours better than most Kesparates its size. It had seen some action. General Mattalaus' battalions had passed through its streets going south to the causeway, where rebels were attempting to build a makeshift bridge across the delta; and later a party of families from the Caramess had taken refuge in Kop-pocovi's Rialto. But no barricades had been erected, and none of the buildings burned. The Deliquium would meet the morning intact. Its survival, however, would not be accorded to general disinterest; rather to the presence at its perimeter of Pale Hill, a site which was neither a hill nor pale, but a circle of remembrance in the center of which lay a well, used from time immemorial as a repository for the corpses of executed men, suicides, paupers, and, on occasion, romantics who favored rotting in such company. Tomorrow's rumors would whisper that the ghosts of these forsaken souls had risen to defend their terrain, preventing

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the vandals and the barricade builders from destroying the Kesparate by haunting the steps of the Ipse and the Rialto and howling in the streets like dogs maddened from chasing the comet's tail.

With her clothes in rags and her throat uttering one seamless supplication, Quaisoir went through the heart of several battles quite unscathed. There were many such grief-stricken women on the streets of Yzordderrex tonight, all begging Hapexamendios to return children or husbands into their arms, and they were for the most part given passage through the lines, their sobs password enough.

The battles themselves didn't distress her; she'd organized and viewed mass executions in her time. But when the heads had rolled she'd always made a swift departure, leaving the aftermath for somebody else to shovel up. Now she had to tread barefoot in streets that were like abattoirs, and her legendary indifference to the spectacle of death was overtaken by a horror so profound she had several times changed her direction to avoid a street that stank too strongly of innards and burned blood. She knew she would have to confess this cowardice when she finally found the Man of Sorrows, but she was so laden with guilt that one more fault or less would scarcely matter.

Then, as she came to the corner of the street at the end of which lay Pluthero Quexos' playhouse, somebody called her name. She stopped and looked for her summoner. A man dressed in blue was rising from a doorstep, the fruit he'd been peeling in one hand, the peeling blade in the other. He seemed to be in no doubt as to her identity.

"You're his woman," he said.

Was this the Lord? she wondered. The man she'd seen on the rooftops at the harbor had been silhouetted against a bright sky; his features had been difficult to see. Could this be him?

He was calling someone from the interior of the house on the steps of which he'd been sitting, a sometime bordello to judge by its lewdly carved portico. The disciple, an Oethac, emerged with a bottle in one hand, the other ruffling

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the hair of a cretinous boy child, naked and glistening. She began to doubt her first judgment, but she didn't dare leave until she had her hopes confirmed or dashed.

"Are you the Man of Sorrows?" she said.

The fruit peeler shrugged. "Isn't everybody tonight?" he said, tossing the uneaten fruit away.

The cretin leapt down the steps and snatched it up, pushing the entire thing into his mouth so that his face bulged and the juice ran from his lips.

"You're the cause of this," the peeler said, jabbing his knife in Quaisoir's direction. He glanced around at the Oethac. "She was at the harbor. I saw her."

"Who is she?" the Oethac said.

"The Autarch's woman," came the reply. "Quaisoir." He took a step towards her. "You are, aren't you?"

She could no more deny this than she could take flight. If this man was indeed Jesu, she couldn't begin her pleas for forgiveness with a lie.

"Yes," she told him, "I'm Quaisoir. I was the Autarch's woman."

"She's fucking beautiful," the Oethac said.

"What she looks like doesn't matter," the fruit peeler told him. "It's what she's done that's important."

"Yes," Quaisoir said, daring to believe now that this was indeed the Son of David. "That's what's important. What I've done."

"The executions ..."

"Yes."

"The purges ..."

"Yes."

"I've lost a lot of friends, and you're the reason."

"Oh, Lord, forgive me," she said, and dropped to her knees.

"I saw you at the harbor this morning," Jesu said, approaching her as she knelt. "You were smiling."

"Forgive me."

"Looking around and smiling. And I thought, when I saw you—"

He was three paces away from her now.

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"—your eyes glittering—"

His sticky hand took hold of her head.

"—I thought, those eyes—"

He raised the knife—

"—have to go."

—and brought it down again, quick and sharp, sharp and quick, pricking out his disciple's sight before she could start to scream.

The tears that suddenly filled Jude's eyes stung like no tears she'd ever shed before. She let out a sob, more of pain than of grief, pushing the heels of her hands against her eye sockets to stem the flow. But it wouldn't cease. The tears kept coming, hot and harsh, making her whole head throb. She felt Dowd's arm take hold of hers and was glad of it. Without his support, she was certain she would have fallen.

"What's wrong?" he said.

The answer—that she was sharing some agony with Quaisoir—was not one she could voice to Dowd. "It must be the smoke," she said. "I can barely see."

"We're almost at the Ipse," he replied. "But we have to keep moving for a little while longer. It's not safe in the open air."

That was true enough. Her eyes—which at present could only see pulsing red—had been laid on enough atrocities in the last hour to fuel a lifetime of nightmares. The Yzordder-rex of her longings, the city whose spicy wind, blowing from the Retreat months before, had summoned her like the call of a lover to bed, was virtually in ruins. Perhaps that was why Quaisoir wept these burning tears.

They dried after a time, but the pain lingered. Though she despised the man she was leaning upon, without his support she would have dropped to the ground and remained there. He coaxed her on, step by step. The Ipse was close now, he said: just a street or two away. She could rest there, while he soaked up the echoes of past glories. She barely attended to his monologue. It was her sister who filled her thoughts, her anticipation of their meeting now tinged with unease. She'd imagined Quaisoir would have come into

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these streets protected, and that at the sight of her Dowd would simply retreat, leaving them to their reunion. But what if Dowd was not overtaken by superstitious awe? What if, instead, he attacked one or both of them? Would Quaisoir have any defense against his mites? She began to wipe at her streaming eyes as she stumbled on, determined to be clear-sighted when the moment came, and primed to escape Dowd's leash.

His monologue, when it ceased, did so abruptly. He halted, drawing Jude to a stop at his side. She raised her head. The street ahead was not well lit, but the glow of distant fires found its way between the buildings, and there, crawling into one such flickering shaft, she saw her sister. Jude let out a sob. Quaisoir's eyes had been stabbed out, and her torturers were coming in pursuit of her. One was a child, one an Oethac. The third, the most blood-spattered, was also the most nearly human, but his features were twisted out of true by the pleasure he was taking in Quaisoir's torment. The blinding knife was still in his hand, and now he raised it above his victim's naked back.

Before Dowd could move to stop her, Jude screamed, "Stop!"

The knife was arrested in mid-descent, and all three of Quaisoir's pursuers looked around at Jude. The child registered nothing; its face was an imbecilic blank. The knifewielder was equally silent, though his expression was one of disbelief. It was the Oethac that spoke, the words he uttered slurred but ripe with panic.

"You . . . keep . . . your distance," he said, his fearful glance going back and forth between the wounded woman and this echo of her, whole and strong.

The blinder found his voice now, and began to hush him, but the Oethac rattled on.

"Look at her!" he said. "What the fuck is this, eh? *Look* at her."

"Just shut your trap," the blinder said. "She's not going to touch us."

"You don't know that," said the Oethac, picking up the child with one arm and slinging it over his shoulder. "It

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wasn't me," he went on, as he backed away. "I never laid a finger on her. I swear. On my scars, I swear."

Jude ignored his weaselings and took a step towards Quaisoir. As soon as she moved, the Oethac fled. The blinder, however, held his ground, taking courage from his blade.

"I'll do you the same way," he warned. "I don't care who the fuck you are, I'll do you!"

From behind her, Jude heard Dowd's voice, carrying an authority she'd never heard in it before.

"I'd leave her be if I were you," he said.

His utterance brought a response from Quaisoir. She raised her head and turned in Dowd's direction. Her eyes had not simply been stabbed out but virtually dug from their sockets. Seeing the holes, Jude was ashamed to have been so troubled by the little ache that she felt in sympathy; it was nothing beside Quaisoir's hurt. Yet the woman's voice was almost joyful.

"Lord?" she said. "Sweet Lord, is this punishment enough? Will you forgive me now?"

Neither the nature of the error Quaisoir was making here nor its profound irony was lost on Jude. Dowd was no savior. But he was happy enough to assume that role, it seemed. He replied to Quaisoir with a delicacy as feigned as the sonority he'd affected seconds before.

"Of course I'll forgive you," he said. "That's what I'm here to do."

Jude might have been tempted to disabuse Quaisoir of her illusions there and then, but that the blinder was usefully distracted by Dowd's performance.

"Tell me who you are, child," Dowd said.

"You know who the fuck she is," the blinder spat, "Quaisoir! It's fucking Quaisoir!"

Dowd glanced back at Jude, his expression one of comprehension rather than shock. Then he looked again at the blinder.

"So it is," he said.

"You know what she's done same as me," the man said. "She deserves worse than this."

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"Worse, you think?" Dowd said, continuing to advance towards the man, who was nervously passing his knife from hand to hand, as though he sensed that Dowd's capacity for cruelty outstripped his own a hundredfold and was preparing to defend himself if need be.

"What worse would you do?" Dowd said. "What she's done to others, over and over." "She did these things personally, you think?" "I wouldn't put it past her," he said. "Who knows what the fuck goes on up there? People disappear, and get washed up again in pieces. . . ." He tried a little smile, plainly nervous now. "You know she deserved it." "And you?" Dowd asked. "What do you deserve?" "I'm not saying I'm a hero," the blinder replied. "I'm just saying she had it coming." "I see," said Dowd.

From Jude's vantage point, what happened next was more a matter of conjecture than observation. She saw Quaisoir's maimer take a step away from Dowd, repugnance on his face; then saw him lunge forward as if to stab Dowd through the heart. His attack put him in range of the mites, and before his blade could find Dowd's flesh they must have leapt at the blinder, because he dropped back with a shout of horror, his free hand going up to his face. Jude had seen what followed before. The man scrabbled at his eyes and nostrils and mouth, his legs giving out beneath him as the mites undid his system from the inside. He fell at Dowd's feet and rolled around in a fury of frustration, eventually putting his knife into his mouth and digging bloodily for the things that were unmaking him. The life went out of him as he was doing so, his hand dropping from his face, leaving the blade in his throat as though he'd choked upon it.

"It's over," Dowd said to Quaisoir, who had wrapped her arms around her shuddering body and was lying on the ground a few yards from her tormentor's corpse. "He won't hurt you again." "Thank you, Lord." "The things he accused you of, child?"

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"Yes,"

"Terrible things."

"Yes."

"Are you guilty of them?"

"I am," Quaisoir said. "I want to confess them before Idie. Will you hear me?"

"I will," Dowd said, oozing magnanimity.

After being merely a witness to these events as they unraveled, Jude now stepped towards Quaisoir and her confessor, but Dowd heard her approach and turned to shake his head.

"I've sinned, my Lord Jesu," Quaisoir was saying. "I've sinned so many times. I beg you to forgive me."

It was the despair Jude heard in her sister's voice, rather than Dowd's rebuff, that kept her from making her presence known. Quaisoir was *in extremis*, and given that it was her clear desire to commune with some forgiving spirit, what right did Jude have to intervene? Dowd was not the Christ Quaisoir believed him to be, but did that matter? What would revealing the father confessor's true identity achieve now, besides adding to the sum of her sister's suffering?

Dowd had knelt beside Quaisoir and had taken her up into his arms, demonstrating a capacity for tenderness, or at least for its replication, that Jude would never have believed him capable of. For her part, Quaisoir was in bliss, despite her wounds. She clutched at Dowd's jacket and thanked him over and over for doing her this kindness. He hushed her softly, saying there was no need for her to make a catalogue of her crimes.

"You have them in your heart, and I see them there," he said. "I forgive them. Tell me instead about your husband. Where is he? Why hasn't he also come asking for forgiveness?"

"He didn't believe you were here," Quaisoir said. "I told him I'd seen you down at the harbor, but he has no faith." "None?"

"Only in himself," she said bitterly. Dowd began to rock backward and forward as he pried

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her with further questions, his focus so devoted to his victim he didn't notice Jude's approach. She envied Dowd his embrace, wishing it were her arms. Quaisoir was lying in instead of his.

"Who *is* your husband?" Dowd was asking.

"You know who he is," Quaisoir replied. "He's the Autarch. He rules the Imajica."

"But he wasn't always Autarch, was he?"

"No."

"So what was he before?" Dowd wanted to know. "An ordinary man?"

"No," she said. "I don't think he was ever an ordinary man. I don't remember exactly."

He stopped rocking her. "I think you do," he said, his tone subtly shifting. "Tell me," he said. "Tell me: What was he before he ruled Yzordderrex? And what were you?"

"I was nothing," she said simply.

"Then how were you raised so high?"

"He loved me. From the very beginning, he loved me."

"You did no unholy service to be elevated?" Dowd said.

She hesitated, and he pressed her harder.

"What did you do?" he demanded. "What? What?" There was a distant echo of Oscar in that expletive: the servant speaking with his master's voice.

Intimidated by this fury, Quaisoir replied. "I visited the Bastion of the Banu many times," she confessed. "Even the Annex. I went there too."

"And what's there?"

"Madwomen. Some who killed their spouses, or their children."

"Why did you seek such pitiful creatures out?"

"There are ... *powers* ... hidden among them."

At this, Jude attended more closely than ever.

"What kind of powers?" Dowd said, voicing the question she was silently asking.

"I did nothing unholy," Quaisoir protested. "I just wanted to be cleansed. The Pivot was in my dreams. Every night, its shadow on me, breaking my back. I only wanted to be cleansed of it."

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"And were you?" Dowd asked her. Again she didn't answer at first, until he pressed her, almost harshly. "Were you?"

"I wasn't cleansed, I was changed," she said. "The women polluted me. I have a taint in my flesh and I wish it were out of me." She began to tear at her clothes, till her fingers found her belly and breasts. "I want it driven out!" she said. "It gave me new dreams, worse than before."

"Calm yourself," Dowd said.

"But I want it out! I want it out!" A kind of fit had suddenly taken her, and she flailed so violently in his arms she fell from them. "I can feel it in me now," she said, her nails raking her breasts.

Jude looked at Dowd, willing him to intervene, but he simply stood up, staring at the woman's distress, plainly taking pleasure in it. Quaisoir's self-assault was not theatrics. She was drawing blood from her skin, still yelling that she wanted the taint out of her. In her agony, a subtle change was coming over her flesh, as though she was sweating out the taint she'd spoken of. Her pores were oozing a sheen of iridescence, and the cells of her skin were subtly changing color. Jude knew the blue she saw spreading from her sister's neck, down over her body and up towards her contorted face. It was the blue of the stone eye, the blue of the Goddess.

"What is this?" Dowd demanded of his confessee.

"Out of me! Out of me!"

"Is this the taint?" He went down on his haunches beside her. *"Is it?"*

"Drive it out of me!" Quaisoir sobbed, and began assaulting her poor body afresh.

Jude could endure it no longer. Allowing her sister to die blissfully in the arms of a surrogate divinity was one thing. This self-mutilation was quite another. She broke her vow of silence.

"Stop her," she said.

Dowd looked up from his study, drawing his thumb across his throat to hush her. But it was too late. Despite her own commotion, Quaisoir had heard her sister speak. Her

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thrashings slowed, and her blind head turned in Jude's direction.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

There was naked fury on Dowd's face, but he hushed her softly. She would not be placated, however.

"Who's with you, Lord?" she asked him.

With his reply he made an error that unknitted the whole fiction. He lied to her.

"There's nobody," he said.

"I heard a woman's voice. Who's there?"

"I told you," Dowd insisted. "Nobody." He put his hand upon her face. "Now calm yourself. We're alone."

"No, we're not."

"Do you doubt me, child?" Dowd replied, his voice, after the harshness of his last interrogations, modulating with this question, so that he sounded almost wounded by her lack of faith. Quaisoir's reply was to silently take his hand from her face, seizing it tightly in her blue, blood-speckled fingers.

"That's better," he said.

Quaisoir ran her fingers over his palm. Then she said, "No scars."

"There'll always be scars," Dowd said, lavishing his best pontifical manner upon her. But he'd missed the point of her remark.

"There are no scars on your hand," she said.

He retrieved it from her grasp. "Believe in me," he said.

"No," she replied. "You're not the Man of Sorrows." The joy had gone from her voice. It was thick, almost threatening. "You can't save me," she said, suddenly flailing wildly to drive the pretender from her. "Where's my Savior? I want my Savior!"

"He isn't here," Jude told her. "He never was."

Quaisoir turned in Jude's direction. "Who are you?" she said. "I know your voice from somewhere."

"Keep your mouth shut," Dowd said, stabbing his finger in Jude's direction. "Or so help me you'll taste the mites—"

"Don't be afraid of him," Quaisoir said.

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"She knows better than that," Dowd replied. "She's seen what I can do."

Eager for some excuse to speak, so that Quaisoir could hear more of the voice she knew but couldn't yet name, Jude spoke up in support of Dowd's conceit.

"What he says is right," she told Quaisoir. "He can hurt us both, badly. He's not the Man of Sorrows, sister."

Whether it was the repetition of words Quaisoir had herself used several times—Man of Sorrows—or the fact that Jude had called her sister, or both, the woman's sightless face slackened, the bafflement going out of it. She lifted herself from the ground.

"What's your name?" she murmured. "Tell me your name."

"She's nothing," Dowd said, echoing Quaisoir's own description of herself minutes earlier. "She's a dead woman." He made a move in Jude's direction. "You understand so little," he said. "And I've forgiven you a lot for that. But I can't indulge you any longer. You've spoiled a fine game. I don't want you spoiling any more."

He put his left hand, its forefinger extended, to his lips.

"I don't have many mites left," he said, "so one will have to do. A slow unraveling. But even a shadow like you can be undone."

"I'm a shadow now, am I?" Jude said to him. "I thought we were the same, you and I? Remember that speech?"

"That was in another life, lovey," Dowd said. "It's different here. You could do me harm here. So I'm afraid it's going to have to be *thank you and good night*."

She started to back away from him, wondering as she did so how much distance she would have to put between them to be out of range of his wretched mites. He watched her retreat with pity on his face.

"No good, lovey," he said. "I know these streets like the back of my hand."

She ignored his condescension and took another backward step, her eye fixed on his mouth where the

mites nested, but aware that Quaisoir had risen and was standing no more than a yard from her defender.

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"Sister?" the woman said.

Dowd glanced around, distracted from Jude long enough for her to take to her heels. He let out a shout as she fled, and the blind woman lunged towards the sound, grabbing his arm and neck and dragging him towards her. The noise she made as she did so was like nothing Jude had heard from human lips, and she envied it: a cry to shatter bones like glass and shake color from the air. She was glad not to be closer, or it might have brought her to her knees.

She looked back once, in time to see Dowd spit the lethal mite at Quaisoir's empty sockets, and prayed her sister had better defenses against its harm than the man who'd emptied them. Whether or no, she could do little to help. Better to run while she had the chance, so that at least one of them survived the cataclysm.

She turned the first corner she came to, and kept turning corners thereafter, to put as many decisions between herself and her pursuer. No doubt Dowd's boast was true; he did indeed know these streets, where he claimed he'd once triumphed, like his own hand. It followed that the sooner she was out of them, and into terrain unfamiliar to them both, the more chance she had of losing him. Until then, she had to be swift and as nearly invisible as she could make herself. Like the shadow Dowd had dubbed her: darkness in a deeper dark, flitting and fleeting; seen and gone.

But her body didn't want to oblige. It was weary, beset with aches and shudders. Twin fires had been set in her chest, one in each lung. Invisible hounds ripped her heels bloody. She didn't allow herself to slow her pace, however, until she'd left the streets of playhouses and brothels behind and was delivered into a place that might have stood as a set for a Pluthero Quexos tragedy: a circle a hundred yards wide, bounded by a high wall of sleek, black stone. The fires that burned here didn't rage uncontrolled, as they did in so many other parts of the city, but flickered from the tops of the walls in their dozens; tiny white flames, like night-lights, illuminating the inclined pavement that led down to an opening in the center of the circle. She could only guess at its function. An entrance into the city's secret

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underworld, perhaps, or a well? There were flowers every where, most of the petals shed and gone to rot, slickening the pavement beneath her feet as she approached the hole, obliging her to tread with care. The suspicion grew that if this was a well, its water was poisoned with the dead. Obituaries were scrawled on the pavement—names, dates, messages, even crude illustrations—their numbers increasing the closer to the edge she came. Some had even been inscribed on the inner wall of the well, by mourners brave or broken-hearted enough to dare the drop.

Though the hole exercised the same fascination as a cliff edge, inviting her to peer into its depths, she refused its petitions and halted a yard or two from the lip. There was a sickly smell out of the place, though it wasn't strong. Either the well had not been used of late, or else its occupants lay a very long way down.

Her curiosity satisfied, she looked around to choose the best route out. There were no less than eight exits—nine, including the well—and she went first to the avenue that lay opposite the one she'd come in by. It was dark and smoky, and she might have taken it had there not been signs that it was blocked by

rubble some way down its length. She went to the next, and it too was blocked, fires flickering between fallen timbers. She was going to the third door when she heard Dowd's voice. She turned. He was standing on the far side of the well, with his head slightly cocked and a put-upon expression on his face, like a parent who'd caught up with a truant child.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said. "I know these streets." "I heard you."

"It isn't so bad that you came here," he said, wandering towards her. "It saves me a mite."

"Why do you want to hurt me?" she said. "I might ask you the same question," he said. "You *do*, don't you? You'd love to see me hurt. You'd be even happier if you could do the hurting personally. Admit it!" "I admit it."

"There. Don't I make a good confessor after all? And that's just the beginning. You've got some secrets in you I

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didn't even know you had." He raised his hand and described a circle as he spoke. "I begin to see the perfection of all this. Things coming round, coming round, back to the place where it all began. That is: to her. Or to you; it doesn't matter, really. You're the same."

"Twins?" Jude said. "Is that it?"

"Nothing so trite, lovey. Nothing so natural. I insulted you, calling you a shadow. You're more miraculous than that. You're—" He stopped. "Well, wait. This isn't strictly fair. Here's me telling you what I know and getting nothing from you."

"I don't know anything," Jude said. "I wish I did."

Dowd stooped and picked up a blossom, one of the few underfoot that was still intact. "But whatever Quaisoir knows you also know," he said. "At least about how it all came apart."

"How what came apart?"

"The Reconciliation. You were there. Oh, yes, I know you think you're just an innocent bystander, but there's no body in this, *nobody*, who's innocent. Not Estabrook, not Godolphin, not Gentle or his mystif. They've all got confessions as long as their arms."

"Even you?" she asked him.

"Ah, well, with me it's different." He sighed, sniffing at the flower. "I'm an actor chappie. I fake my raptures. I'd like to change the world, but I end up as entertainment. Whereas all you *lovers*" —he spoke the word contemptuously— "who couldn't give a fuck about the world as long as you're feeling passionate, you're the ones who make the cities burn and the nations tumble. You're the engines in the tragedy, and most of the time you don't even know it. So what's an actor chappie to do, if he wants to be taken seriously? I'll tell you. He has to learn to fake his feelings so well he'll be allowed off the stage and into the real world. It's taken me a lot of rehearsal to get where I am, believe me. I started small, you know; very small. Messenger. Spear-carrier. I once pimped for the Unbeheld, but it was just a one-night stand. Then I was back serving lovers—"

"Like Oscar."

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"Like Oscar."

"You hated him, didn't you?"

"No, I was simply bored, with him and his whole family. He was so like his father, and his father's father, and so on, all the way back to crazy Joshua. I became impatient. I knew things would come around eventually, and I'd have my moment, but I got so tired of waiting, and once in a while I let it show."

"And you plotted."

"But of course. I wanted to hurry things along, towards the moment of my...emancipation. It was all very calculated. But that's me, you see? I'm an artist with the soul of an accountant."

"Did you hire Pie to kill me?"

"Not knowingly," Dowd said. "I set some wheels in motion, but I never imagined they'd carry us all so far. I didn't even know the mystic was alive. But as things went on, I began to see how inevitable all this was. First Pie's appearance. Then your meeting Godolphin, and your falling for each other. It was all bound to happen. It was what you were born to do, after all. Do you miss him, by the way? Tell the truth."

"I've scarcely thought about him," she replied, surprised by the truth of this.

"Out of sight, out of mind, eh? Ah, I'm so glad I can't feel love. The misery of it. The sheer, unadulterated misery." He mused a moment, then said, "This is so much like the first time, you know. Lovers yearning, worlds trembling. Of course last time I was merely a spear-carrier. This time I intend to be the prince."

"What do you mean, I was born to fall for Godolphin? I don't even remember *being* born."

"I think it's time you did," Dowd said, tossing away the flower as he approached her. "Though these rites of passage are never very easy, lovey, so brace yourself. At least you've picked a good spot. We can dangle our feet over the edge while we talk about how you came into the world."

"Oh, no," she said. "I'm not going near that hole."

"You think I want to kill you?" he said. "I don't. I just

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want you to unburden yourself of a few memories. That's not asking too much, is it? Be fair. I've given you a glimpse of what's in my heart. Now show me yours." He took hold of her wrist "I won't take no for an answer," he said, and drew her to the edge of the well.

She'd not ventured this close before, and its proximity was vertiginous. Though she cursed him for having the strength to drag her here, she was glad he had her in a tighthold.

"Do you want to sit?" he said. She shook her head. "As you like," he went on. "There's more chance of

your falling, but it's your decision. You've become a very self-willed woman, lovey, I've noticed that. You were malleable enough at the beginning. That was the way you were bred to be, of course."

"I wasn't bred to be anything."

"How do you know?" he said. "Two minutes ago you were claiming you don't even remember the past. How do you know what you were meant to be? *Made* to be?" He glanced down the well. "The memory's in your head somewhere, lovey. You just have to be willing to coax it out. If Quaisoir sought some Goddess, maybe you did too, even if you don't remember it. And if you did, then maybe you're more than Joshua's Peachplum. Maybe you've got someplace in the action I haven't accounted for."

"Where would I meet Goddesses, Dowd?" Jude replied. "I've lived in the Fifth, in London, in Notting Hill Gate. There are no Goddesses."

Even as she spoke she thought of Celestine, buried beneath the Tabula Rasa's tower. Was she a sister to the dei'ties that haunted Yzordderrex? A transforming force, locked away by a sex that worshiped fixedness? At the memory of the prisoner, and her cell, Jude's mind grew suddenly light, as though she'd downed a whisky on an empty stomach. She had been touched by the miraculous, after all. So if once, why not many times? If now, why not in her forgotten past?

"I've got no way back," she said, protesting the difficulty of this as much for her own benefit as Dowd's.

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"It's easy," he replied. "Just think of what it was like to be born."

"I don't even remember my childhood."

"You *had* no childhood, lovey. You had no adolescence. You were born just the way you are, overnight. Quaisoir was the first Judith, and you, my sweet, are only her replica. Perfect, maybe, but still a replica."

"I won't... I don't... believe you."

"Of course you must refuse the truth at first. It's perfectly understandable. But your body knows what's true and what isn't. You're shaking, inside and out...."

"I'm tired," she said, knowing the explanation was pitifully weak.

"You're feeling more than weary," Dowd said. "Admit it."

As he pried, she remembered the results of his last revelations about her past: how she'd dropped to the kitchen floor, hamstrung by invisible knives. She dared not succumb to such a collapse now, with the well a foot from where she stood, and Dowd knew it.

"You have to face the memories," he was saying. "Just spit them out. Go on. You'll feel better for it, I promise you."

She could feel both her limbs and her resolve weakening as he spoke, but the prospect of facing whatever lay in the darkness at the back of her skull—and however much she distrusted Dowd, she didn't doubt there was something horrendous there—was almost as terrifying as the thought of the well taking her. Perhaps it would be better to die here and now, two sisters extinguished within the same hour, and

never know whether Dowd's claims were true or not. But then suppose he'd been lying to her all along—the actor's finest performance yet—and she was not a shadow, not a replica, not a thing bred to do service, but a natural child with natural parents: a creature unto herself, real, complete? Then she'd be giving herself to death out of fear of self-discovery, and Dowd would have claimed another victim. The only way to defeat him was to call his bluff; to do as he kept urging her to do and go into the dark-

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ness at the back of her head, ready to embrace whatever revelations it concealed. Whichever Judith she was, she was; whether real or replica, natural or bred. There was no escape from herself in the living world. Better to know the truth, once and for all.

The decision ignited a flame in her skull, and the first phantoms of the past appeared in her mind's eye.

"Oh, my Goddess," she murmured, throwing back her head. "What is this? What is this?"

She saw herself lying on bare boards in an empty room, a fire burning in the grate, warming her in her sleep and flattening her nakedness with its taster. Somebody had marked her body while she slept, daubing upon it a design she recognized—the glyph she'd first seen in her mind's eye when she'd made love with Oscar, then glimpsed again as she passed between Dominions—the spiraling sign of her flesh, here painted on flesh itself in half a dozen colors.

She moved in her sleep, and the whorls seemed to leave traces of themselves in the air where she'd been, their persistence exciting another motion, this other in the ring of sand that bounded her hard bed. It rose around her like the curtain of the Borealis, shimmering with the same colors in which her glyph had been painted, as though something other essential anatomy was in the very air of the room. She was entranced by the beauty of the sight.

"What are you seeing?" she heard Dowd asking her.

"Me," she said, "lying on the floor...in a circle of sand...."

"Are you sure it's you?" he said.

She was about to pour scorn on his question, when she realized its import. Perhaps this wasn't her, but her sister.

"Is there any way of knowing?" she said.

"You'll soon see," he told her.

So she did. The curtain of sand began to wave more violently, as if seized by a wind unleashed within the circle. Particles flew from it, intensifying as they were thrown against the dark air: motes of the purest color rising like new stars, then dropping again, burning in their descent, towards the place where she, the witness, lay. She was lying on

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the ground close to her sister, receiving the rain of color like

a grateful earth, needing its sustenance if she was to grow and swell and become fruitful.

"What am I?" she said, following the fall of color to snatch a glimpse of the ground it was falling upon.

The beauty of what she'd seen so far had lulled her into vulnerability. When she saw her own unfinished body, the shock threw her out of the remembrance like a blow. Suddenly she was teetering on the wall's edge again, with Dowd's hand the only check upon her falling. Ice water sweat filled her pores.

"Don't let me go," she said.

"What are you seeing?" he asked her.

"Is this being born?" she sobbed. "Oh, Christ, is this being born?"

"Go back to the memory," he said. "You've begun it, so, finish it!" He shook her. "Hear me? *Finish it!*"

She saw his face raging before her. She saw the well, yearning behind. And in between, in the firelit room awaiting her in her head, she saw a nightmare worse than both: her anatomy, barely made, lying in a circle of perverted enchantments, raw until the distillates of another woman's body put skin on her sinew and color in that skin, put the tint in her eyes and the gloss on her lips, gave her the same breasts, belly, and sex. This was not birth, it was duplication. She was a facsimile, a likeness stolen from a slumbering original.

"I can't bear it," she said.

"I did warn you, lovey," Dowd replied. "It's never easy, reliving the first moments."

"I'm not even *real*," she said.

"Let's stay clear of the metaphysics," came the reply. "What you are, you are. You had to know sooner or later."

"I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

"But you *are* bearing it," Dowd said. "You just have to take it slowly. Step by step."

"No more...."

"Yes," he insisted. "A lot more. That was the worst. It'll get easier from now on."

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That was a lie. When memory took her again, almost without her inviting it, she was raising her arms above her

head, letting the colors congeal around her outstretched fingers. Pretty enough, until she let one arm drop beside her and her new-made nerves felt a presence at her side, sharing the womb. She turned her head and screamed. "What is it?" Dowd said. "Did the Goddess come?" It was no Goddess. It was another unfinished thing, gaping at her with lidless eyes, putting out its colorless tongue, which was still so rough it could have licked her new skin off her. She retreated from it, and her fear aroused it, the pale

anatomy shaken by silent laughter. It too had gathered motes of stolen color, she saw, but it had not bathed in them; rather, it had caught them in its hands, postponing the moment it attired itself until it had luxuriated in its flayed nakedness.

Dowd was interrogating her again. "Is it the Goddess?" he was asking. "What are you seeing? Speak it out, woman! Speak it —"

His demand was cut suddenly short. There was a beat of silence, then a cry of alarm so shrill her conjuring of the cir-

cle and the thing she'd shared it with vanished. She felt Dowd's grip on her wrist slip, and her body toppled. She flailed as she fell, and more by luck than design her motion threw her sideways, along the rim of the well, rather than pitching her within. Instantly, she began to slip down the incline. She clutched at the pavement. But the stone had been polished by years of passage, and her body slid towards the edge as if the depths were calling in a long-neglected debt. Her legs kicked empty air, her hips sliding over the well's lip

while her fingers sought some purchase, however slight—a name etched a little deeper than the rest; a rose thorn,

wedged between stones—that would give her some defense against gravity. As she did so she heard Dowd cry out a second time, and she looked up to see a miracle.

Quaisoir had survived the mite. The change that had come over her flesh when she rose in defiance of Dowd was here completed. Her skin was the color of the blue eye; her face, so lately maimed, was bright. But these were little

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changes, beside the dozen ribbons of her substance, several yards in length, that were unraveled around her, their source her back, their purpose to touch in succession the ground beneath her and raise her up into a strange flight. The power she'd found in the Bastion was blazing in her and Dowd could only retreat before it, to the edge of the well. He kept his silence now, dropping to his knees, preparing to crawl away beneath the spiraling skirts of filament

Jude felt slip what little hold her fingers had and let out cry for help.

"Sister?" Quaisoir said.

"Here!" Jude yelled. "Quickly."

As Quaisoir moved towards the well, the tendrils' lightest touch enough to propel her forward, Dowd made his move, ducking beneath the tendrils. He'd mistimed his escape, however. One of the filaments caught his shoulder and, spiraling around his neck, pitched him over the edge of the well. As he went, Jude's right hand lost its purchase entirely, and she began to slide, a final desperate yell coming from her as she did so. But Quaisoir was as swift in saving as dispatching. Before the well's rim rose to eclipse the scene above, Jude felt the filaments seize her wrist and arm, their spirals instantly tightening around her. She seized them in return, her exhausted muscles quickened by the touch, and Quaisoir drew her up over the edge of the well, depositing her on the pavement. She rolled over onto her back and panted like a sprinter at the tape, while Quaisoir's filaments unknitted themselves and returned to serve their mistress.

It was the sound of Dowd's begging, echoing up from the well where he was suspended, that made her sit up. There was nothing in his cries she might not have predicted from a man who'd rehearsed servitude over so many generations. He promised Quaisoir eternal obedience and utter self-abnegation if only she'd save him from this terror. Wasn't mercy the jewel in any heavenly crown, he sobbed, and wasn't she an angel?

"No," Quaisoir said. "Nor am I the bride of Christ."

Undeterred, he began a new cycle of descriptions and negotiations: what she was; what he would do for her, in

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perpetuity. She would find no better servant, no humbler acolyte. What did she want, his manhood?; it was nothing; he would geld himself there and then. She only had to ask. If Jude had any doubt as to the strength Quaisoir had

gained, she had evidence of it now, as the tendrils drew their prisoner up from the well. He gushed like a holed bucket as he came. "Thank you, a thousand times, thank you—"

In view now, he was in double jeopardy, Jude saw, his feet hanging over empty air and the tendrils around his throat tight enough to throttle him, had he not relieved their pressure by thrusting his fingers between noose and neck. Tears poured down his cheeks, in theatrical excess.

"Ladies," he said. "How do I begin to make amends?" Quaisoir's response was another question. "Why was I misled by you?" she said. "You're just a man. What do you know about divinities?"

Dowd looked afraid to reply, not certain which would be more likely to prove fatal, denial or affirmation.

"Tell her the truth," Jude advised him. "I served the Unbeheld once," he said. "He found me in the desert and sent me to the Fifth Dominion." "Why?"

"He had business there." "What business?"

Dowd began to squirm afresh. His tears had dried up. The drama had gone from his voice.

"He wanted a woman," he said, "to bear him a son in the Fifth."

"And you found one?"

"Yes, I did. Her name was Celestine."

"And what happened to her?"

"I don't know. I did what I was asked to do, and—"

"What happened to her?" Quaisoir said again, more forcefully.

"She died," Dowd replied, trailing that possibility to see if it was challenged. When it wasn't he took it up

with fresh gusto. "Yes, that's what happened. She perished. In child-

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birth, so I believe. Hapexamendios impregnated her, you see, and her poor body couldn't bear the responsibility."

Dowd's style was by now too familiar to deceive Jude. She knew the music he put into his voice when he lied, and heard it clearly now. He was well aware that Celestine was alive. There had been no such music in his early revelations, however—his talk of procuring for Hapexamendios—which seemed to indicate that this was indeed a service he'd done the God.

"What about the child?" Quaisoir asked him. "Was it a son or a daughter?"

"I don't know," he said. "Truly, I don't."

Another lie, and one his captor sensed. She loosened the noose, and he dropped a few inches, letting out a sob of terror and clutching at the filaments in his panic.

"Don't drop me! Please God, don't drop me!"

"What about the child?"

"What do I know?" he said, tears beginning again, only this time the real thing. "I'm nothing. I'm a messenger. A spear-carrier."

"A pimp," she said.

"Yes, that too. I confess it. I'm a pimp! But it's nothing, it's nothing. Tell her, Judith! I'm just an actor chappie. A fucking worthless actor chappie!"

"Worthless, eh?"

"Worthless!"

"Then good night," Quaisoir said, and let him go.

The noose slipped through his fingers with such suddenness he had no time to take a faster hold, and he dropped like a dead man from a cut rope, not even beginning to shriek for several seconds, as though sheer disbelief had silenced him until the iris of smoky sky above him had closed almost to a dot. When his din finally rose it was high-pitched, but brief.

As it stopped, Jude laid her palms against the pavement and, without looking up at Quaisoir, murmured her thanks, in part for her preservation but at least as much for Dowd's dispatch.

"Who was he?" Quaisoir asked.

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"I only know a little part of this," Jude replied.

"Little by little," Quaisoir said. "That's how we'll understand it all. Little...by...little."

Her voice was exhausted, and when Jude looked up she saw the miracle was leaving Quaisoir's cells. She had sunk to the ground, her unfurled flesh withdrawing into her body, the beatific blue fading from her skin. Jude picked herself up and hobbled from the edge of the hole.

Hearing her footsteps, Quaisoir said, "Where are you going?"

"Just away from the well," Jude said, laying her brow and her palms against the welcome chill of the wall. "Do you know who I am?" she asked Quaisoir, after a little time.

"Yes," came the soft reply. "You're the one I lost. You're the other Judith."

"That's right." She turned to see that Quaisoir was smiling, despite her pain.

"That's good," Quaisoir said. "If we survive this, maybe you'll begin again for both of us. Maybe you'll see the visions I turned my back on."

"What visions?"

Quaisoir sighed. "I was loved by a great Maestro once," she said. "He showed me angels. They used to come to our table in sunbeams. I swear. Angels in sunbeams. And I thought we'd live forever, and I'd learn all the secrets of the sea. But I let hurt lead me out of the sun. I let him persuade me the spirits didn't matter. Only our will mattered, and if we willed pain, then that was wisdom. I lost myself in such a little time, Judith. Such a little time." She shuddered. "I was blinded by my crimes before anyone ever took a knife to me."

Jude looked pityingly on her sister's maimed face. "We've got to find somebody to clean your wounds," she said.

"I doubt there's a doctor left alive in Yzordderrex," Quaisoir replied. "They're always the first to go in any revolution, aren't they? Doctors, tax collectors, poets...."

"If we can't find anybody else, I'll do it," Jude said, leav-

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ing the security of the wall and venturing back down the incline to where Quaisoir sat.

"I thought I saw Jesus Christ yesterday," she said. "He was standing on a roof with his arms open wide. I thought he'd come for me, so that I could make my confession, That's why I came here: to find Jesus. I heard his messenger."

"That was me."

"You were...in my thoughts?"

"Yes."

"So I found you instead of Christos. That seems like a greater miracle." She reached out towards Jude,

who took her hand. "Isn't it, sister?"

"I'm not sure yet," Jude said. "I was myself this morning. Now what am I? A copy, a forgery."

The word brought Klein's Bastard Boy to mind: Gentle the faker, making profit from other people's genius. Is that why he'd obsessed upon her? Had he seen in her some subtle clue to her true nature and followed her out of devotion to the sham she was?

"I was happy," she said, thinking back to the good times she'd shared with him. "Maybe I didn't always realize I was happy, but I was. I was myself."

"You still are."

"No," she said, as close to despair as she could ever remember being. "I'm a piece of somebody else."

"We're all pieces," Quaisoir said. "Whether we were born or made." Her fingers tightened around Jude's hand. "We're all hoping to be whole again. Will you take me back up to the palace?" she said. "We'll be safer there than here."

"Of course," Jude replied, helping her up.

"Do you know which direction to go?"

She said she did. Despite the smoke and the darkness, the walls of the palace loomed above them, massive but remote.

"We've got quite a climb ahead of us," Jude said. "It may take us till morning."

"The night is long in Yzordderrex," Quaisoir replied.

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"It won't last forever," Jude said.

"It will for me."

"I'm sorry. That was thoughtless. I didn't mean—"

"Don't be sorry," Quaisoir said. "I like the dark. I can remember the sun better. Sun, and angels at the table. Will you take my arm, sister? I don't want to lose you again."

2

in any other place but this, Gentle might have been frustrated by the sight of so many sealed doors, but as Lazare-vich led him closer to the Pivot Tower the atmosphere grew so thick with dread he was glad whatever lay behind those doors was locked away. His guide spoke scarcely at all. When he did it was to suggest that Gentle make the rest of the journey alone.

"It's a little way now," he kept saying. "You don't need me any more."

"That's not the deal," Gentle would remind him, and Lazarevich would curse and whine, then head on some distance in silence, until a shriek down one of the passages, or a glimpse of blood spilled on the polished floor, made him halt and start his little speech afresh.

At no point in this journey were they challenged. If these titanic halls had ever buzzed with activity—and given that small armies could be lost in them, Gentle doubted that they ever had—they were all but deserted now. Those few servants and bureaucrats they did encounter were busy leaving, burdened with hastily gathered belongings as they hurried down the corridors. Survival was their foremost priority. They gave the bleeding soldier and his ill-dressed companion scarcely a look.

At last they came to a door, this one unsealed, which Lazarevich refused point-blank to enter.

"This is the Pivot Tower," he said, his voice barely audible.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Can't you feel it?"

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Now it was remarked upon, Gentle did indeed feel a subtle sensation, barely strong enough to be called a tingle, in his fingertips, testicles, and sinuses.

"That's the tower, I swear," Lazarevich whispered.

Gentle believed him. "All right," he said. "You've done your duty; you'd better go."

The man grinned. "You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank you. Whoever you are. Thank you."

Before he could skip away, Gentle took hold of his arm and drew him close. "Tell your children," he said, "not to be soldiers. Poets, maybe, or shoeshiners. But not soldiers. Got it?"

Lazarevich nodded violently, though Gentle doubted he'd comprehended a word. His only thought was of escape, and he took to his heels the moment Gentle let go of him and was out of sight in two or three seconds. Turning to the beaten brass doors, Gentle pushed them a few inches wider and slipped inside. The nerve endings in his scrotum and palms knew that something of significance was nearby—what had been subtle sensation was almost painful now—even though his eyes were denied sight of it by the murk of the room he'd entered. He stood by the door until he was able to grasp some sense of what lay ahead. This was not, it seemed, the Pivot Tower itself but an antechamber of some kind, as stale as a sickroom. Its walls were bare, its only furniture a table upon which a canary cage lay overturned, its door open, its occupant flown. Beyond the table, another doorway, which he took, led him into a corridor, staler still than the room he'd left. The source of agitation in his nerve endings was audible now: a steady tone that might have been soothing under other circumstances. Not knowing which direction it was coming from, he turned to his right and crept down the corridor. A flight of stairs curved out of sight to his left. He chose not to take them, his instinct rewarded by a glimmer of light up ahead. The Pivot's tone became less insistent as he advanced, suggesting this route was a cul-de-sac, but he headed on towards the light to be cer-

tain Pie was not being held prisoner in one of these ante-chambers.

As he came within half a dozen strides of the room somebody moved across the doorway, flitting through his field of vision too quickly to be seen. He flattened himself against the wall and edged towards the room. A wick, set in a bowl of oil on a table, shed the light he'd been drawn to. Beside it, several plates contained the remains of a meal. When he reached the door he waited there for the man—the night watch, he supposed—to come back into view. He had nowish to kill him unless it was strictly necessary. There'd been enough widows and orphans in Yzordderrex by tomorrow morning without his adding to the sum. He heard the man fart, not once but several times, with the abandon of someone who believed himself alone, then heard him open another door, his footsteps receding.

Gentle chanced a glance around the doorjamb. The room was empty. He quickly stepped inside, intending to take from the table the two knives that were lying there. On one of the plates was an already rifled assortment of candies. He couldn't resist.

He picked the most luscious and had it to his mouth when the man behind said, "Rosengarten?"

He looked around, and as his gaze settled on the face across the room his jaw clenched in shock, breaking on the candy between his teeth. Sight and sugar mingled, tongue and eye feeding such a sweetness to his brain he reeled.

The face before him was a living mirror: *his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his hairline, his bearing, his bafflement, his fatigue.* In everything but the cut of his coat and the muck beneath his fingernails, another Gentle. But not by that name, surely.

Swallowing the sweet liqueur from the candy, Gentle very slowly said, "Who ... in God's name...are you?"

The shock was draining from the other's face, and amusement replacing it. He shook his head. "... damn kreauchee ..."

"That's your name?" Gentle replied. "Damn Kreauchee?"

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He'd heard stranger in his travels. But the question only served to amuse the other more.

"Not a bad idea," he replied. "There's enough in my system. The Autarch Damn Kreauchee. That's got a ring to it."

Gentle spat the candy from his mouth. "Autarch?" he said.

The amusement fled from the other's face. "You've made your point, wisp. Now fuck off." He closed his eyes. "Get a hold of yourself," he half whispered. "It's the fucking kreauchee. It's happened before, it'll happen again."

Now Gentle understood. "You think you're dreaming me, don't you?" he said.

The Autarch opened his eyes, angered to find the hallucination still hanging around. "I told you—" he said.

"What *is* this kreauchee? Some kind of alcohol? Dope? Do you think I'm a bad trip? Well, I'm not."

He started towards the other, who retreated in alarm.

"Go on," Gentle said, extending his hand. "Touch me. I'm real. I'm here. My name's John Zacharias, and I've come a long way to see you. I didn't think that was the reason, but now I'm here, I'm sure it was."

The Autarch raised his fists to his temples, as if to beat this drug dream from his brain.

"This isn't possible," he said. There was more than disbelief in his voice; there was an unease that was close to fear. "You can't be here. Not after all these years."

"Well, I am," said Gentle. "I'm as confused as you, believe me. But I'm here."

The Autarch studied him, turning his head this way and that, as though he still expected to find some angle from which to view the visitor that would reveal him as an apparition. But after a minute of such study he gave it up and simply stared at Gentle, his face a maze of furrows.

"Where did you come from?" he said slowly.

"I think you know," Gentle replied.

"The Fifth?"

"Yes."

"You came to bring me down, didn't you? Why didn't I see it? You started this revolution! You were out in the

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streets, sowing the seeds! No wonder I couldn't root the rebels out. I kept wondering: Who is it? Who's out there, plotting against me? Execution after execution, purge after purge, and I never got to the one at the heart of it. The one who was as clever as me. The nights I lay awake thinking: Who is it? Who? I made a list as long as my arm. But never you, Maestro. Never *Sartori*."

Hearing the Autarch name himself was shocking enough, but this second naming bred utter rebellion in Gentle's system. His head filled with the same din that had beset him on the platform at Mai-ke, and his belly disgorged its contents in one bilious heave. He put his hand out to the table to steady himself and missed the edge, slipping to the floor where his vomit was already spattered. Floundering in his own mess, he tried to shake the noise from his head, but all he did was unknot the confusion of sounds and let the words they concealed slip through.

Sartori! He was Sartori! He didn't waste breath questioning the name. It was his, and he knew it. And what worlds there were in that naming: more confounding than anything the Dominions had unveiled, opening before him like windows blown wide and shattered, never to be closed again.

He heard the name spoken out of a hundred memories. A woman sighed it as she begged him back into her disheveled bed. A priest beat out the syllables on his pulpit, prophesying damnation. A gambler blew it into his cupped hands to bless his dice. Condemned men made prayers of it; drunkards, mockery; carousers, songs.

Oh, but he'd been famous! At St. Bartholomew Fair there'd been troupes who'd filled their purses, telling his life as farce. A bordello in Bloomsbury had boasted a sometime nun driven to nymphomania by his touch, who would chant his conjurations (so she said) as she was fucked. He was a paradigm of all things fabulous and forbidden: a threat to reasoning men; to their wives, a secret vice. And to the children, trailing past his house after the beadle—he was a rhyme:

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CLIVE BARKER

Maestro Sartori

Wants a bit o' glory.

He loves the cats,

He loves the dogs,

He turns the ladies into frogs,

He made some hats

Of baby rats;

But that's another story.

This chant, repeated in his head in the piping voices of parish orphans, was worse in its way than the pulpit curses, or the sobs, or the prayers. It rolled on and on, in its fatuous way, gathering neither meaning nor music as it went. Like his life, without this name: motion without purpose.

"Had you forgotten?" the Autarch asked him.

"Oh, yes," Gentle replied, unbidden and bitter laughter coming to his lips with the reply. "I'd forgotten."

Even now, with the voices rebaptizing him with their clamor, he could scarcely believe it. Had this body of his survived two hundred years and more in the Fifth Dominion, while his mind went on deceiving itself: holding only a decade of life in its consciousness and hiding the rest away? Where had he lived all those years? Who had he been? If what he'd just heard was true, this act of remembering was just the first. There were two centuries of memories concealed in his brain somewhere, waiting to be discovered. No wonder Pie had kept him in ignorance. Now that he knew, madness was very close.

He got to his feet, holding on to the table for support. "Is Pie 'oh' pah here?" he said.

"The mystic? No. Why? Did it come with you from the Fifth?"

"Yes, it did."

A twitch of a smile returned to the Autarch's face. "Aren't they exquisite creatures?" he said. "I've had one ortwo myself. They're an acquired taste, but once you've got ityou never really lose it again. But no, I haven't seen it."

"Judith, then?"

"Ah." He sighed. "Judith. I assume you mean Godol-

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phin's lady? She went by a lot of names, didn't she? Mindyou, we all did. What do they call you these days?"

"I told you. John Furie Zacharias. Or Gentle."

"I have a few friends who know me as Sartori. I'd like to number you among them. Or do you want the name back?"

"Gentle will do. We were talking about Judith. I saw herthis morning, down by the harbor."

"Did you see Christ down there?"

"What are you talking about?"

"She came back here saying she'd seen the Man of Sor?rows. She had the fear of the Lord in her. Crazy bitch." Hesighed. "It was sad, really, to see her that way. I thought it was just too much kreauchee at first, but no. She'd finallylost her mind. It was running out of her ears."

"Who are we talking about?" Gentle said, thinking oneor the other of them had mislaid the path of the conversa?tion.

"I'm talking about Quaisoir, my wife. She came with mefrom the Fifth."

"I was talking about Judith."

"So was I."

"Are you saying—"

"There are two. You made one of them yourself, forGod's sake, or have you forgotten that too?"

"Yes. Yes, I'd forgotten."

"She was beautiful, but she wasn't worth losing theImajica for. That was your big mistake. You should haveserved your hand and not your rod. Then I'd never havebeen born, and God would be in His heaven, and you'd be Pope Sartori. Ha! Is that why you came back? To becomepopo? It's too late, brother. By tomorrow morning Yzord-derrex will be a heap of smoking ash. This is my last nighthere. I'm going to the Fifth. I'm going to build a new empirethere."

"Why?"

"Don't you remember the rhyme they used to sing? For glory's sake."

"Haven't you had enough of that?"

"You tell me. Whatever's in my heart was plucked from

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CLIVE BARKER

yours. Don't tell me you haven't dreamed of power. You were the greatest Maestro in Europe. There was nobody could touch you. That didn't all evaporate overnight."

He moved towards Gentle for the first time in this exchange, reaching out to lay his steady hand on Gentle's shoulder.

"I think you should see the Pivot, brother Gentle," he said. "That'll remind you of what power feels like. Are you steady on your feet?" "Reasonably." "Come on, then."

He led the way back into the passage, to the flight of stairs Gentle had declined to take. Now he did so, following Sartori around the curve of the staircase to a door without a handle.

"The only eyes laid on the Pivot since the tower was built are mine," he said. "Which has made it very sensitive to scrutiny."

"My eyes are yours," Gentle reminded him. "It'll know the difference," Sartori replied. "It'll want to . . . probe you." The sexual subtext of this wasn't lost on him. "You'll just have to He back and think of England," he said. "It's over quickly."

So saying he licked his thumb and laid it on the rectangle of slate-colored stone set in the middle of the door, inscribing a figure in spittle upon it. The door responded to the signal. Its locks began to grind into motion.

"Spit too, huh?" Gentle said. "I thought it was just breath."

"You use pneuma?" Sartori said. "Then I should be able to. But I haven't got the trick of it. You'll have to teach me, and I'll . . . remind you of a few sways in return." "I don't understand the mechanics of it." "Then we'll learn together," Sartori replied. "The principles are simple enough. Matter and mind, mind and matter. Each transforming the other. Maybe that's what *we're* going to do. Transform one another."

With that thought, Sartori put his palm on the door and pushed it open. Though it was fully six inches thick it moved

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without a sound, and with an extended hand Sartori invited Gentle to enter, speaking as he did so.

"It's said that Hapexamendios set the Pivot in the middle of the Imajica so that His fertility would flow from it into every Dominion." He lowered his voice, as if for an indiscretion. "In other words," he said. "This is the phallus of the Unbeheld."

Gentle had seen this tower from the outside, of course; it soared above every other pylon and dome in the palace. But he hadn't grasped its enormity until now. It was a square stone tower, seventy or eighty feet from side to side and so tall that the lights blazing in the walls to illuminate its sole occupant receded like cat's eyes in a highway till sheer distance dimmed then erased them. An extraordinary sight: but nothing beside the monolith around which the tower had been constructed. Gentle had been steeling himself for an assault when the door was opened: the tone he'd heard in his skull as he'd crept along the passage below rattling his teeth, the charge burning in his fingers. But there was nothing, not even a murmur, which was in its way more distressing. The Pivot knew he was here in its chamber but was keeping its counsel, silently assessing him as he assessed it.

There were several shocks. The first, and the least, how beautiful it was, its sides the color of thunderclouds, hewn so that seams of brightness flowed in them like hidden lightning. The second, that it was not set on the ground but hovered, in all its enormity, ten feet from the floor of the tower, casting a shadow so dense that the dark air was almost a plinth.

"Impressive, huh?" Sartori remarked, his cocky tone as inappropriate as laughter at an altar. "You can walk underneath it. Go on. It's quite safe."

Gentle was reluctant, but he was all too aware that his other was watching for his weaknesses, and any sign of fear now might be used against him later. Sartori had already seen him sickened and down on his knees; he didn't want the bastard to get another glimpse of frailty.

"Aren't you coming with me?" he said, glancing around at the Autarch.

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CLIVE BARKER

"It's a very private moment," the other replied, and stood back to let Gentle venture into the shadow.

It was like stepping back into the wastes of the Jokalay-lau. Cold cut him to the marrow. His breath was snatched from his lungs and appeared before him in a bitter cloud. Gasping, he turned his face to the power above him, his mind divided between the rational urge to study the phenomenon and the barely controllable desire to drop to his knees and beg it not to crush him. The heaven above him had five sides, he saw. One for each Dominion, perhaps. And like the hewn flanks, flickers of lightning appeared in it here and there. But it wasn't simply a trick of seam and shadow that gave the stone the look of a thundercloud. There was motion in it, the solid rock roiling above him. He threw a glance towards Sartori, who was standing at the door, casually putting a cigarette between his lips. The flame he struck to light it with was a world away, but Gentle didn't envy him its warmth. Icy as this shadow was, he wanted the stone sky to unfurl above him and deliver its judgment down; he wanted to see whatever power the Pivot possessed unleashed, if only to know that such powers and such judgments existed. He looked away from Sartori almost contemptuously, the thought shaping in his head that for all the other's talk of possessing this monolith, the years it had spent in this tower were moments in its incalculable span, and he and Sartori would have come and gone, their little mark eroded by those that followed, in the time it took the stone to blink its cloudy eye.

Perhaps it read that thought from his cortex and approved, because the light, when it came, was kind. There was sun in the stone as well as lightning, warmth as well as a killing fire. It brightened the mantle, then fell in shafts, first around him, then upon his upturned face. The moment had antecedents: events in the Fifth that had prophesied this, their parent's, coming. He'd stood on Highgate Hill once, when the city road was still a muddy track, and looked up to see the clouds drop glory down as they were doing now. He'd gone to the window of his room in Gamut Street and seen the same. He'd watched the smoke clear after a night

of bombing—1941, the Blitz at its height—and seeing the sun burn through, had known in some place too tender to be touched that he'd forgotten something momentous, and that if he ever remembered—if a light like this ever burned the veil away—the world would unravel.

That conviction came again, but this time there was more than a vague unease to support it. The tone that had sounded in his skull had come again, attendant on the light, and in it, described by the subtlest variation in its monotony, he heard words.

The Pivot was addressing him.

Reconciler, it said.

He wanted to cover his ears and shut the word out. Drop to the ground like a prophet begging to be unburdened of some divine duty. But the word was inside as well as out. There was no escaping it.

The work's not finished yet, the Pivot said.

"What work?" he said.

You know what work.

He did, of course. But so much pain had come with that labor, and he was ill equipped to bear it again.

Why deny it? the Pivot said.

He stared up into the brightness. "I failed before, and so many people died. I can't do it again. Please. I can't."

What did you come here for? the Pivot asked him, its voice so tenuous he had to hold his breath to catch the shape of the words. The question took him back to Taylor's bedside, to that plea for comprehension.

"To understand ..." he said.

To understand what?

"I can't put it into words...it sounds so pitiful...."

Say it.

"To understand why I was born. Why anybody's born."

You know why you were born.

"No, I don't. I wish I did, but I don't."

You're the Reconciler of Dominions. You're the healer of the Imajica. Hide from that, and you hide from understanding. Maestro, there's a worse anguish than remembering, and another suffers it because

you leave your work unfinished.

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CLIVE BARKER

Go back into the Fifth Dominion and complete what you began. Make the many One. This is the only salvation.

The stone sky began to roil again, and the clouds closed over the sun. With the darkness, the cold returned, but he didn't relinquish his place in the Pivot's shadow for several seconds, still hoping some crack would open and the God speak a last consoling word, a whisper perhaps, of how this onerous duty might be passed to another soul more readily equipped to accomplish it. But there was nothing. The vision had passed, and all he could do was wrap his arms around his shuddering frame and stumble out to where Sartori stood. The other's cigarette lay smoking at his feet, where it had dropped from his fingers. By the expression on his face it was apparent that even if he'd not comprehended every detail of the exchange that had just taken place, he had the gist.

"The Unbeheld speaks," he said, his voice as flat as the God's.

"I don't want this," Gentle said.

"I don't think this is any place to talk about denying Him," Sartori said, giving the Pivot a queasy glance.

"I didn't say I was denying Him," Gentle replied. "Just that I didn't want it."

"Still better discussed in private," Sartori whispered, turning to open the door.

He didn't lead Gentle back to the mean little room where they'd met, but to a chamber at the other end of the passageway, which boasted the only window he'd seen in the vicinity. It was narrow and dirty, but not as dirty as the sky on the other side. Dawn had begun to touch the clouds, but the smoke that still rose in curling columns from the fires below all but canceled its frail light.

"This isn't what I came for," Gentle said as he stared out at the murk. "I wanted answers."

"You've had 'em."

"I have to take what's mine, however foul it is?"

"Not yours, *ours*. The responsibility. The pain"—he paused—"and the glory, of course."

Gentle glanced at him. "It's mine," he said simply.

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Sartori shrugged, as though this were of no consequence to him whatsoever. Gentle saw his own wiles working in that simple gesture. How many times had he shrugged in precisely that fashion—raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips, looked away with feigned indifference? He let Sartori believe the bluff was working.

"I'm glad you understand," he said. "The burden's mine."

"You've failed before."

"But I came close," Gentle said, feigning access to a memory he didn't yet have in the hope of coaxing an informative rebuttal.

"Close isn't good enough," Sartori said. "Close is lethal. A tragedy. Look what it did to you. The great Maestro. You crawl back here with half your wits missing."

"The Pivot trusts me."

That struck a tender place. Suddenly Sartori was shouting.

"Fuck the Pivot! Why should you be the Reconciler? Huh? Why? One hundred and fifty years I've ruled the Imajica. I know how to use power. You don't."

"Is that what you want?" Gentle said, trailing the bait of that possibility. "You want to be the Reconciler in my place?"

"I'm better equipped than you," Sartori raged. "All you're good for is sniffing after women."

"And what are you? Impotent?"

"I know what you're doing. I'd do the same. You're stirring me up, so I'll spill my secrets. I don't care. There's nothing you can do I can't do better. You wasted all those years, hiding away, but I *used* them. I turned myself into an empire builder. What did you do?" He didn't wait for an answer. He knew his subject too well. "You've learned nothing. If you began the Reconciliation now, you'd make the same mistakes."

"And what were they?"

"It comes down to one," Sartori said. "Judith. If you hadn't wanted her—" He stopped, studying his other. "You don't even remember that, do you?"

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CLIVE BARKER

"No," Gentle said. "Not yet."

"Let me tell you, brother," Sartori said, coming face to face with Gentle. "It's a sad story."

"I don't weep easily."

"She was the most beautiful woman in England. Some people said, in Europe. But she belonged to Joshua Godolphin, and he guarded her like his soul."

"They were married?"

"No. She was his mistress, but he loved her more than any wife. And of course he knew what you felt, you didn't disguise it, and that made him afraid—oh, *God*, was he afraid—that sooner or later you were going to seduce her and spirit her away. It'd be easy. You were the Maestro Sartori; you could do anything. But he was one of your patrons, so you bided your time, thinking maybe he'd tire of her, and then you could have her without bad blood between you. It didn't happen. The months went by, and his

devotion was as intense as ever. You'd never waited this long for a woman before. You started to suffer like a lovesick adolescent. You couldn't sleep. Your heart palpitated at the sound of her voice. This wasn't good for the Reconciliation, of course, having the Maestro pining away, and Godolphin came to want a solution as badly as you did. So when you found one, he was ready to listen."

"What was it?"

"That you make another Judith, indistinguishable from the first. You had the feits to do it."

"Then he'd have one ..."

"And so would you. Simple. No, not simple. Very difficult. Very dangerous. But those were heady days. Dominions hidden from human eyes since the beginning of time were just a few ceremonies away. Heaven was possible. Creating another Judith seemed like small potatoes. You put it to him, and he agreed—"

"Just like that?"

"You sweetened the pill. You promised him a Judith better than the first. A woman who wouldn't age, wouldn't tire of his company or the company of his sons, or the sons of his sons. This Judith would belong to the men of the Godolphin

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family in perpetuity. She'd be pliant, she'd be modest, she'd be perfect."

"And what did the original think of this?"

"She didn't know. You drugged her, you took her up to the Meditation room in the house in Gamut Street, you lit a blazing fire, stripped her naked, and began the ritual. You anointed her; you laid her in a circle of sand from the margin of the Second Dominion, the holiest ground in the Imajica. Then you said your prayers, and you waited." He paused, enjoying this telling. "It is, let me remind you, along a conjuration. Eleven hours at the minimum, watching the doppelgänger grow in the circle beside its source. You'd made sure there was nobody else in the house, of course, not even your precious mystic. This was a very secret ritual. So you were alone, and you soon got bored. And when you got bored, you got drunk. So there you were, sitting in the room with her, watching her perfection in the firelight, obsessing on her beauty. And eventually—half out of your mind with brandy—you made the biggest mistake of your life. You tore off your clothes, you stepped into the circle, and you did about everything a man can do to a woman, even though she was comatose, and you were hallucinating with fasting and drink. You didn't fuck her once, you did it over and over, as though you wanted to get up inside her. Over and over. Then you fell into a stupor at her side."

Gentle began to see the error looming. "I fell asleep in the circle?" he said.

"In the circle."

"And *you* were the consequence."

"I was. And let me tell you, it was quite a birth. People say they don't remember the moment they came into the world, but I do. I remember opening my eyes in the circle, with her beside me, and these rains of

matter coming down on me, congealing around my spirit. Becoming bone. Becoming flesh." All expression had gone from his face. "I remember," he said, "at one point she realized she wasn't alone and she turned and saw me lying beside her. I was unfinished. An anatomy lesson, raw and wet. I've never forgotten the noise she made—"

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CLIVE BARKER

"I didn't wake up through any of this?"

"You'd crawled away downstairs to douse your head, and you'd fallen asleep. I know because I found you, later on, sprawled on the dining room table."

"The conjuration still worked, even though I'd left the circle?"

"You're quite the technician, aren't you? Yes, it still worked. You were an easy subject. It took hours to decode Judith and make *her* doppelganger. But you were incandescent. The sway read you in minutes and made me in a couple of hours."

"You knew who you were from the beginning?"

"Oh, yes. I was *you*, in your lust. I was *you*, full of drunken visions. I was *you*, wanting to fuck and fuck, and conquer and conquer. But I was also you when you'd done your worst, with your balls empty and your head empty, like death had got in, sitting there between her legs trying to remember what it was you were living for. I was that man too, and it was terrifying to have both those feelings in me at the same time."

He paused a moment.

"It still is, brother."

"I would have helped you, surely, if I'd known what I'd done."

"Or put me out of my misery," Sartori said. "Taken me into the garden and shot me like a rabid dog. I didn't know what you'd do. I went downstairs. You were snoring like an atrooper. I watched you for a long while, wanting to wake you, wanting to share the terror I felt, but Godolphin arrived before I got up the courage. It was just before dawn. He'd come to take Judith home. I hid myself. I watched Godolphin wake you; I heard you talk together, I saw you climb the stairs like two expectant fathers and go into the Meditation Room. Then I heard your whoops of celebration, and I knew once and for all that I wasn't an intended child."

"What did you do?"

"I stole some money and some clothes. Then I made my escape. The fear passed after a time. I began to realize what

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I was, the knowledge I possessed. And I realized I had this... appetite. Your appetite. I wanted glory."

"And this is what you did to get it?" Gentle said, turning back to the window. The devastation below was

clearer by the minute, as the comet's light strengthened. "Brave work, brother."

"This was a great city once. And there'll be others, just as great. Greater, because this time there'll be two of us to build it. And two of us to rule."

"You've got me wrong," Gentle said. "I don't want an empire."

"But it's bound to come," Sartori said, fired up with this vision. "You're the Reconciler, brother. You're the healer of the Imajica. You know what that could mean for us both? If you reconcile the Dominions there'll have to be one great city—a new Yzordderrex—to rule it from end to end. I'll find it and administrate it, and you can be pope."

"I don't want to be pope."

"What *do* you want then?"

"Pie 'oh' pah for one. And some sense of what all this means."

"Being born to be the Reconciler's enough meaning for anyone. It's all the purpose you need. Don't run from it."

"And what were you born to do? You can't build cities forever." He glanced out at the desolation. "Is that why you've destroyed it?" he said. "So you can start again?"

"I didn't destroy it. There was a revolution."

"Which you fueled, with your massacres," Gentle said. "I was in a little village called Beatrix, a few weeks ago—"

"Ah, yes. Beatrix." Sartori drew a heavy breath. "It was you, of course. I knew somebody was watching me, but I didn't know who. The frustration made me cruel, I'm afraid."

"You call that cruel? I call it inhuman."

"It may take you a little time to understand, but every now and again such extremes are necessary."

"I knew some of those people."

"You won't ever have to dirty your hands with that kind of unpleasantness. I'll do whatever's necessary."

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"So will I," said Gentle.

Sartori frowned. "Is that a threat?" he said.

"This began with me, and it'll end with me."

"But *which me*, Maestro? That one"—he pointed at Gentle—"or this? Don't you see, we weren't meant to be enemies. We can achieve so much more if we work together." He put his hand on Gentle's shoulder. "We were meant to meet this way. That's why the Pivot kept silent all these years. It was

waiting for you to come, and us to be reunited." His face slackened. "Don't be my enemy," he said. "The thought of—"

A cry of alarm from outside the room cut him short. He returned from Gentle and started towards the door as a soldier appeared in the passageway beyond, his throat open, his hand ineptly staunching the spurts. He stumbled and fell against the wall, sliding to the ground.

"The mob must be here," Sartori remarked, with a hint of satisfaction. "It's time to make your decision, brother. Do we go on from here together, or shall I rule the Fifth alone?"

A new din rose, loud enough to blot out any further exchange, and Sartori left off his counseling, stepping out into the passageway.

"Stay here," he told Gentle. "Think about it while you wait."

Gentle ignored the instruction. As soon as Sartori was around the corner, he followed. The commotion died away as he did so, leaving only the low whistle from the soldier's windpipe to accompany his pursuit. Gentle picked up his pace, suddenly fearing that an ambush awaited his other. No doubt Sartori deserved death. No doubt they both did. But there was a good deal he hadn't prized from his brother yet, especially concerning the failure of the Reconciliation. He had to be preserved from harm, at least until Gentle had every clue to the puzzle out of him. The time would come for them both to pay the penalty for their excesses. But it wasn't yet.

As he stepped over the dead soldier, he heard the mystif's voice. The single word it said was: "Gentle."

Hearing that tone—like no other he'd heard or dreamt—all concern for Sartori's preservation, or his own, was overwhelmed. His only thought was to get to the place where the mystif was; to lay his eyes on it and his arms around it. They'd been parted for far too long. Never again, he swore to himself as he ran. Whatever edicts or obligations were set before them, whatever malice sought to divide them, never again would he let the mystif go.

He turned the corner. Ahead lay the doorway that led out into the antechamber. Sartori was on the other side, partially eclipsed, but hearing Gentle's approach he turned, glancing back into the passageway. The smile of welcome he was wearing for Pie 'oh' pah decayed, and in two strides he was at the door to slam it in his maker's face. Realizing he was outpaced, Gentle yelled Pie's name, but the door was closed before the syllable was out, plunging Gentle into almost total darkness. The oath he'd made seconds before was broken; they were divided again, before they could even be reunited. In his rage Gentle threw himself against the door, but like everything else in this tower it was built to last a millennium. However hard he hit it, all he got was bruises. They hurt; but the memory of Sartori's leer when he'd talked about his taste for mystifs stung more. Even now, the mystif was probably in Sartori's arms. Embraced, kissed, possessed.

He threw himself against the door one final time, then gave up on such primitive assaults. Drawing a breath, he blew it into his fist and slammed the pneuma against the door the way he'd learned to do in the Jokalaylau. It had been a glacier beneath his hand on that first occasion, and the ice had cracked only after several attempts. This time, either because his will to be on the other side of the door was stronger than his desire to free the women in the ice, or simply because he was the Maestro Sartori now, a named man who knew at least a little about the power he wielded, the steel succumbed at the first blow, and a

jagged crack opened in the door.

He heard Sartori shouting on the other side, but he didn't waste time trying to make sense of it. Instead he

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delivered a second pneuma against the fractured steel, and this time his hand passed all the way through the door as pieces flew from beneath his palm. He put his fist to his mouth a third time, smelling his own blood as he did so, but whatever harm this was doing him, it had not yet registered as pain. He caught a third breath and delivered it against the door with a yell that wouldn't have shamed a samurai. The hinges shrieked, and the door flew open. He was through it before it had struck the floor, only to find the antechamber beyond deserted, at least by the living. Three corpses, companions to the soldier who'd raised the alarm, lay sprawled on the floor, all opened with single slashes. He leapt over them to the door, his broken hand adding its drops to the pools he trod.

The corridor beyond was rank with smoke, as though something half rotted was burning in the bowels of the palace. But through the murk, fifty yards from him, he saw Sartori and Pie 'oh' pah. Whatever fiction Sartori had invented to dissuade the mystif from completing its mission, it had proved potent. They were racing from the tower without so much as a backward glance, like lovers just escaped from death's door.

Gentle drew breath, not to issue a pneuma this time but a call. He shouted Pie's name down the passageway, the smoke dividing as his summons went, as though the syllables from a Maestro's mouth had a literal presence. Pie stopped and looked back. Sartori took hold of the mystif's arm as if to hurry it on, but Pie's eyes had already found Gentle, and it refused to be ushered away. Instead it shrugged off Sartori's hold and took a step in Gentle's direction. The curtain of smoke divided by his cry had come together again and made a blur of the mystif's face, but Gentle read its confusion from its body. It seemed not to know whether to advance or retreat.

"It's me!" Gentle called. "It's me!"

He saw Sartori at the mystif's shoulder and caught fragments of the warnings he was whispering: something about the Pivot having hold of their heads.

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"I'm not an illusion, Pie," Gentle said as he advanced. "This is me. Gentle. I'm real."

The mystif shook its head, looking back at Sartori, then again at Gentle, confounded by the sight.

"It's just a trick," Sartori said, no longer bothering to whisper. "Come away, Pie, before it really gets a hold. It can make us crazy."

Too late, perhaps, Gentle thought. He was close enough to see the look on the mystif's face now, and it was lunatic: eyes wide, teeth clenched, sweat making red rivulets of the blood spattered on its cheek and brow. The sometime assassin had long since lost its appetite for slaughter—that much had been apparent back in the Cradle, when it had hesitated to kill though their lives had depended upon it—but it had done so here, and the anguish it felt was written in every furrow of its face. No wonder Sartori had found it so easy to make the mystif forsake its mission. It was teetering on mental collapse. And now,

confronted with two faces it knew, both speaking with the voice of its lover, it was losing what little equilibrium it had left.

Its hand went to its belt, from which hung one of the ribbon blades the execution squad had wielded. Gentle heard it sing as it came, its edge undulled by the slaughter it had already committed.

Behind the mystif, Sartori said, "Why not? It's only a shadow."

Pie's crazed look intensified, and it raised the fluttering blade above its head. Gentle halted. Another step and he was in range of the blade; nor did he doubt that Pie was ready to use it.

"Go on!" Sartori said. "*Kill it!* One shadow more or less...."

Gentle glanced towards Sartori, and that tiny motion seemed enough to spur the mystif. It came at Gentle, the blade whining. He threw himself backwards to avoid the swipe, which would have opened his chest had it caught him, but the mystif was determined not to make the same error twice, and closed the gap between them with a stride. Gentle retreated, raising his arms in surrender, but the mys-

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tif was indifferent to such signs. It wanted this madness gone, and quickly.

"Pie?" Gentle gasped. "It's me! It's me! I left you at the Kesparate! Remember that?"

Pie swung again, not once but twice, the second slash catching Gentle's upper arm and chest, opening the coat, shirt, and flesh beneath. Gentle pivoted on his heel to avoid the following cut, putting his already bloodied hand to the wound. Taking another stumbling step of retreat, he felt the wall of the passageway hard against his spine. He had nowhere else to run.

"Don't I get a last supper then?" he said, not looking at the blade but at Pie's eyes, attempting to stare past the slaughter fugue to the sane mind that cowered behind it. "You promised we'd eat together, Pie. Don't you remember? A fish inside a fish inside—"

The mystif stopped. The blade fluttered at its shoulder,—"a fish."

The blade fluttered on, but it didn't descend. "Say you remember, Pie. *Please* say you remember." Somewhere behind Pie, Sartori began a new round of exhortations, but to Gentle they were just a din. He continued to meet Pie's blank gaze, looking for some sign that his words had moved his executioner. The mystif drew a tiny, broken breath, and the knots that bound its brow and mouth slipped. "Gentle?" it said.

He didn't reply. He just let his hand drop from his shoulder and stood open-armed against the wall.

"Kill it!" Sartori was still saying. "Kill it! It's just an illusion!"

Pie turned, the blade still raised. "Don't!" Gentle said, but the mystif was already starting in the Autarch's direction. Gentle called after it again, pushing himself from the wall to stop it. "Pie! Listen to me—"

The mystif glanced around, and as it did so Sartori raised his hand to his eye and in one smooth motion snatched at it, extending his arm and opening his fist to let fly what it had

plucked. Not the eye itself but some essence of his glance went from the palm like a ball trailing smoke. Gentle reached for the mystif to drag it out of the sway's path, but his hand fell inches short of Pie's back, and as he reached again the sway struck. The fluttering blade dropped from the mystif's hand as it was thrown backwards by the impact, its gaze fixed on Gentle as it fell into his arms. The momentum carried them both to the ground, but Gentle was quick to roll from under the mystif's weight and put his hand to his mouth to defend them with a pneuma. Sartori was already retreating into the smoke, however, on his face a look that would vex Gentle for many days and nights to come. There was more distress in it than triumph; more sorrow than rage.

"Who will reconcile us now?" he said, and then he was gone into the murk, as though he had mastery of the smoke and had pulled it around him to duck away behind its folds.

Gentle didn't give chase but went back to the mystif, lying where it had fallen. He knelt beside it.

"Who was he?" Pie said.

"Something I made," Gentle said, "when I was a Mae'stro."

"Another Sartori?" Pie said.

"Yes."

"Then go after him. Kill him. Those creatures are the most—"

"Later."

"Before he escapes."

"He can't escape, lover. There's nowhere he can go I won't find him."

Pie's hands were clutching at the place in mid-chest where Sartori's malice had struck.

"Let me see," Gentle said, drawing Pie's fingers away and tearing at the mystif's shirt. The wound was a stain on its flesh, black at the center and fading to a pustular yellow at its edges.

"Where's Huzzah?" Pie asked him, breath labored.

"She's dead," Gentle replied. "She was murdered by a Nullianac."

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"!

"So much death," Pie said. "It blinded me. I would have killed you and not even known I'd done it" 'r

"We're not going to talk about death," Gentle said, "We're going to find some way of healing you."

"There's more urgent business than that," Pie said. "I came to kill the Autarch—"

"No, Pie...." }

"That was the judgment," Pie insisted. "But now I can finish it. Will you do it for me?" ;

Gentle put his hand beneath the mystif's head and raised Pie up. ;

"I can't do that," he said. ;

"Why not? You could do it with a breath." ;

"No, Pie. I'd be killing myself."

"What?"

The mystif stared up at Gentle, baffled. But its puzzlement was short-lived. Before Gentle had time to explain, Pie let out a long, sorrowful sigh, in the shape of three soft words. i

"Oh, my Lord." I

"I found him in the Pivot Tower. I didn't believe it at first...."

"The Autarch Sartori," Pie said, as if trying the words for their music. Then, its voice a dirge, it said, "It has a ring."

"You knew I was a Maestro all along, didn't you?"

"Of course." ;

"But you didn't tell me." •

"I got as close as I dared. But I had sworn an oath never to remind you of who you were." ?

"Who made you swear that oath?"

"You did, Maestro. You were in pain, and you wanted to forget your suffering."

"How did I come to forget?" •

"A simple feat."

"Your doing?"

Pie nodded. "I was your servant in that, as in everything. I swore an oath that when it was done, when

the past was

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if hidden away, I would never show it to you again. And oaths don't decay."

&: •"But you kept hoping I'd ask the right questions—" ?f "Yes."

>v "—and invite the memory back in."; *"Yes. And you came close."; "In Mai-ke. And in the mountains."

"But never close enough to free me from my responsibility. I had to keep my silence."

. "Well, it's broken now, my friend. When you're healed—"

; "No, Maestro," Pie said. "A wound like this can't be healed."

"It can and will," Gentle said, not willing to countenance the thought of failure.

He remembered Nikaetomaas I talk of the Dearthers' encampment on the margin of the Second and First Dominions, where she'd said Estabrook had been taken. Miracles of healing were possible there, she'd boasted.

"We're going to make quite a journey, my friend," he said, starting to lift the mystic up.

"Why break your back?" it said to him. "Let's say our farewells here."

"I'm not saying goodbye to you here or anywhere," Gen-tie said. "Now put your arms around me, lover. We've got a long way to go together yet."

3

I

The Comet's ascent into the heavens above Yzordderrex, and the light it shed upon the city's streets, didn't shame the atrocities there into hiding or cessation; quite the other way around. The city was ruled by Ruin now, and its court was everywhere: celebrating the enthronement, parading its emblems—the luckiest already dead—and rehearsing its

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rites in preparation for a long and inglorious reign. Children wore ash today, and carried their parents' heads like censers, still smoking from the fires where they'd been found. Dogs had the freedom of the city and devoured their masters without fear of punishment. The carrion birds Sartori had once tempted off the desert winds to feed on bad meat were gathered on the streets in garrulous hordes, to dine on the men and women who'd gossiped there the day before.

There were those survivors, of course, who clung to the dream of Order and banded together to do what they could under the new regime, digging through the rubble in the hope of finding survivors, dousing fires in buildings that were whole enough to save, giving succor to the grieving and quick dispatch for those

too wounded to bear another breath. But they were easily outnumbered by the souls whose faith in sanity had been shattered and met the comet's eye with dissolution in their hearts. By midmorn-ing, when Gentle and Pie reached the gate that led out of the city into the desert, many of those who'd begun the day determined to preserve something from this calamity had given up and were leaving while they still had their lives. The exodus that would empty Yzordderrex of much of its population within half a week had begun.

Beyond the vague instruction, gleaned from Nikaetomaas, that the encampment to which Estabrook had been taken lay in the desert at the limits of this Dominion, Gentle was traveling blind. He'd hoped to find somebody along the way to give him some better directions, but he encountered nobody who looked fit enough, mentally or physically, to lend him assistance. He'd bound the hand he'd wounded beating down the door of the Pivot Tower as best he could before leaving the palace. The stab wound he'd sustained when Huzzah had been snatched and the cut the mystif's ribbonblade had opened were slight enough to cause him little discomfort. His body, possessed of a Maestro's resilience, had survived three times a natural human span without significant deterioration, and it was quick to begin the process of mending itself now.

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The same could not be said for Pie 'oh' pah's wounded frame. Sartori's sway was venomous, draining the mystif's strength and consciousness. By the time Gentle left the city, the mystif was barely able to move its legs, obliging Gentle to half-hoist it up beside him. He only hoped they found some means of transport before too long, or this journey would be over before it was begun.

There was little chance of hitching a ride with any of their fellow refugees. Most were on foot, and those who had transport—carts, cars, runty mules—were already laden with passengers. Several overburdened vehicles had given up the ghost within sight of the city gates, and those who'd paid for their ride were arguing on the roadside. But most of the travelers went on their way with an eerie hush, barely raising their eyes from the road a few feet in front of them, at least until they reached the spot where that road divided.

Here a bottleneck had been created, as people milled around, deciding on which of the three routes available to them they were going to take. Straight ahead, though a considerable distance from the crossroads, lay a mountain range as impressive as the Jokalaylau. The road to the left led off into greener terrain, and, not surprisingly perhaps, this was the most favored way. The least favored, and for Gentle's purposes the most promising, was the road that lay to the right. It was dusty and badly laid, the terrain it wound through the least lush and therefore the most likely to deteriorate into desert. But he knew from his months in the Dominion that the terrain could change considerably within the space of a few miles, and that perhaps out of sight along this road lay verdant pastures, while the track behind him could just as easily lead into a wilderness. While he was standing in the mill of travelers debating with himself, he heard a high-pitched voice and, peering through the dust, caught sight of a small fellow—young, spectacled, bare-chested, and bald—making his way towards him, arms raised.

"Mr. Zacharias! Mr. Zacharias!"

He knew the face, but from precisely where he couldn't recall, nor could he put a name to it. But the man, perhaps

used to being only half remembered, was quick to supply the information.

"Floccus Dado," he said. "You remember?"

Now he did. This was Nikaetomaas' comrade-in-arms.

Floccus snatched off his glasses and peered at Pie. "Your lady friend looks sick," he said.

"It's not a she. It's a mystif."

"Sorry. Sorry," Floccus said, slipping his spectacles back on and blinking violently. "My error. Sex was never my strong point. Is it very sick?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Is Nika with you?" Floccus said, peering around. "Don't tell me she's gone on ahead. I told her I was going to wait for her here if we got separated."

"She won't be coming, Floccus," Gentle said.

"Why in the Hyo not?"

"I'm afraid she's dead."

Dado's nervous tics and blinks ceased on the instant. He stared at Gentle with a tiny smile on his face, as if he was used to being the butt of jokes and wanted to believe that this was one. "No," he said.

"I'm afraid so," Gentle replied. "She was killed in the palace."

Floccus took off his glasses again and ran his thumb and middle finger from the bridge of his nose along his lower lids. "That's grim," he said.

"She was a very brave woman."

"She was that."

"And she put up a very spirited defense. But we were outnumbered."

"How did *you* escape?" Floccus asked, the inquiry innocent of accusation.

"That's a very long story," Gentle said, "and I don't think I'm quite ready to tell it yet."

"Which way are you heading?" Dado said.

"Nikaetomaas told me you Dearthers have an encampment of some kind, at the margin of the First. Is that right?"

"Indeed we do."

"Then that's where I'm going. She said a man I knew—"

do you know Estabrook?—was healed there. I want to heal Pie."

"Then we'd best go together," Floccus said. "It's no use my waiting here any longer. Nikae's spirit will have passed by a long time ago."

"Do you have any kind of transport?"

"Indeed I do," he said, brightening. "A very fine car I found in the Caramess. It's parked over there." He pointed through the crush.

"If it's still there," Gentle remarked.

"It's guarded," Dado said, with a grin. "May I help you with the mystif?"

He put his arm beneath Pie, who had now lost consciousness completely; then they started to make their way through the crowd, Dado shouting to clear the route ahead. His demands were almost entirely ignored until he started shouting "Ruukassh! Ruukassh!" which had the desired effect of dividing the throng.

"What's Ruukassh?" Gentle asked him.

"Contagious," Dado replied. "Not far now."

A few paces on, and the vehicle came into view. Dado had good taste in loot. Not since that first glorious trip along the Patashoqua Highway had Gentle set eyes on a vehicle so sleek, so polished—or so wholly inappropriate for desert travel. It was powder-blue with silver trim, its tires white, its interior fur lined. Sitting on the hood, its leash tied to one of the wing mirrors, was its guard and antithesis: an animal related to the ragemy—via the hyena—and boasting the least pleasant attributes of both. It was as round and lardy as a pig, but its back and flanks were covered with a coat of mottled fur. Its head was short-snouted but heavily whiskered. Its ears pricked like a dog's at the sight of Dado, and it set up a round of barks and squeals so high they made Dado sound basso profundo by contrast.

"Good girl! Good girl!" he said.

The creature was up on its stubby legs, shaking its rear in delight at its master's return. Its belly was laden with teats, which shook to the rhythm of its welcome.

Dado opened the door, and there on the passenger seat

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was the reason the creature was so defensive of the vehicle: a litter of five yapping offspring, perfect miniatures of their mother. Dado suggested Gentle and Pie take the back seat, while Mama Sighshy, as he called her, sat with her children. The interior stank of the animals, but the previous owner had been fond of comfort, and there were cushions to support the mystif's head and neck. When Sighshy herself was invited back into the vehicle the stench increased tenfold, and she growled at Gentle in a less than friendly manner, but Dado placated her with baby talk, and she was soon curled up on the seat beside him, suckling her fat babes. With the travelers assembled, they headed off towards the mountains.

Exhaustion claimed Gentle after a mile or two, and he slept, his head on Pie's shoulder. The road steadily deteriorated over the next few hours, and the discomfort of the journey repeatedly brought him up to the surface of sleep, with scraps of dreams clinging to him. They were not dreams of Yzordderrex, nor were they memories of the adventures he and Pie had shared on their travels across the Imajica. It was the Fifth his mind was returning to in these fitful slumbers, shunning the horrors and the murders of the Reconciled Dominions for safer territory.

Except that it wasn't safe any longer, of course. The man he'd been in that Dominion—Klein's Bastard Boy, the lover and the faker—was a fabrication, and he could never return to that simple, sybaritic life again. He'd lived a lie, the scale of which even the most suspicious of his mistresses (Vanessa, whose abandoning of him had begun this whole endeavor) could never have imagined; and from that lie, three human spans of self-deceit had come. Thinking of Vanessa, he remembered the empty mews house in London, and the desolation he'd felt wandering it with nothing to show for his life but a string of broken romances, a few forged paintings, and the clothes he was wearing. It was laughable now, but that day he'd thought he could fall no further. Such naivete! He'd learned lessons in despair since

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then numerous enough to fill a book, the bitterest reminder lying in wounded sleep beside him.

Though it was distressing to conceive of losing Pie, he refused himself the indulgence of denying the possibility. He'd turned a blind eye on the unpalatable too often in the past, with catastrophic results. Now the facts had to be faced. The mystif was becoming frailer by the hour, its skin icy, its breath so shallow that on occasion it was barely discernible. Even if all that Nikaetomaas had said about the Erasure's healing powers proved correct, there would be no miracle cure for such a profound malady. Gentle would have to go back to the Fifth alone, trusting that Pie 'oh' pah would be fit enough to follow after a time. The longer he delayed that return, the less opportunity he'd have to muster assistance in the war against Sartori.

That war would come, he had no doubt of it. The urge to conquer burned bright in his other, as it had perhaps once burned in him, until desire and luxury and forgetfulness had dimmed it. But where would he find such allies? Men and women who wouldn't laugh (the way he'd have laughed, six months before) when he started to talk about the Dominion-hopping he'd done and the jeopardy the world was in from a man with his face? Certainly he wouldn't find imaginations among his peer group supple enough to embrace the vistas he was returning to describe. They were fashionably disdainful of belief, having had the flesh-as-star-stuff hopes of youth dashed by midnight sweats and their morning reflection. The most he'd heard any of them confess to was a vague pantheism, and they'd deny even that when sober. Of them all he'd only ever heard Clem espouse any belief in organized religion, and those dogmas were as antithetical to the message he was bringing from the Dominions as the tenets of a nihilist. Even if Clem could be persuaded from the Communion rail to join Gentle, they would be an army of two against a Maestro who had honed his powers until they could command Dominions.

There was one other possibility, and that was Judith. She would certainly not mock his wanderer's tales, but she'd been treated so heinously from the start of this tragedy that

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he dared not expect forgiveness from her, much less fellowship. Besides, who knew where her true sympathies lay? Though she might resemble Quaisoir to the last hair, she'd been made in the same

bloodless womb that had produced the Autarch. Was she not therefore his spiritual sister: not born, but made? If she had to choose between the butcher of Yzordderex and those seeking to destroy him, could she be trusted to side with the destroyers, when their victory would mean she'd lose the only creature in the Imajica who shared her condition? Though she and Gentle had meant much to each other (who knew how many liaisons they'd enjoyed over the centuries; reigniting the desire which had brought them together in the first place, then parting again, forgetting they'd even met?) he had to treat her with the utmost caution from this point on. She'd been innocent in the dramas of an earlier age, a toy in cruel and careless hands. But the woman she'd become over the decades was neither victim nor toy, and if (or perhaps *when*) she became aware of her past she was perfectly capable of revenging herself upon the man who'd made her, however much she'd claimed to love him once.

Seeing that his passenger was now awake, Floccus gave Gentle a progress report. They were making good time, he said. Within an hour they'd be in the mountains, on the other side of which the desert lay,

"How long do you estimate to the Erasure?" Gentle asked him.

"We'll be there before nightfall," Floccus promised. "How's the mystif faring?"

"Not well, I'm afraid."

"There'll be no cause to mourn," Floccus said brightly, "I've known people on death's door who were healed at the Erasure. It's a place of miracles. But then everywhere is, if we just knew how to look. That's what Father Athanasius taught me. You were in prison with Athanasius, weren't you?"

"I was never exactly imprisoned. Not the way he was."

"But you met him?"

"Oh, yes. He was priest at our wedding."

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"You and mystif, you mean? You're married?" He whistled. "Now you, sir, are what I call a lucky man. I've heard a lot about these mystifs, and I never heard of one getting married before. They're usually lovers. Heartbreakers." He whistled again. "Well, that's wonderful," he said. "We'll make sure she makes it, sir, don't you worry. Oh, I'm sorry. She's not a she, is she? I've got to get that right. It's just that when I look at her—I mean it—I see a she, you know? I suppose that's the wonder of them."

"It's part of it."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"When you look at her, what do you see?"

"I've seen all kinds of things," Gentle replied. "I've seen women. I've seen men. I've even seen myself."

"But at the moment," Floccus said. "What do you see right now?"

Gentle looked at the mystif. "I see Pie," he said. "I see the face I love."

Floccus made no reply to this, and after such gushing enthusiasm Gentle knew there had to be some significance in his silence.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I do. We're friends, aren't we? At least getting that way. Tell me."

"I was thinking it's not good you care too much about the way she looks. The Erasure's no place to be in love with things as they are. People heal there, but they also change, you understand?" He took both hands off the wheel to make cupped palms, like scales. "There's got to be a balance. Something given, something taken away."

"What kind of changes?" Gentle said.

"Different from one to another," Floccus said. "But you'll see for yourself, very soon. When we get close to the First Dominion, nothing's quite as it seems."

"Isn't that true of everything?" Gentle said. "The more I live, the less I seem to be certain about."

Floccus' hands were back on the wheel, his burst of

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sunny talk suddenly overcast. "I don't think Father Athanasius ever talked about that," he said. "Maybe he did. I don't remember everything he said."

The conversation ended there, leaving Gentle to wonder if in bringing the mystif back to the borders of the Dominion from which its people had been exiled, returning the great transformer to a land in which transformation was a commonplace, he was undoing the knot Athanasius had tied in the Cradle of Chzercem.

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Jude had never been much impressed with architectural rhetoric, and she found nothing in the courtyards or corridors of the Autarch's palace to dissuade her from that indifference. There were some sights that put her in mind of natural splendors: smoke drifting across the forsaken gardens like morning mist, or clinging to the cold stone of the towers like cloud to a mountain spire. But such punnish pleasures were few. It was mostly bombast: everything built on a scale intended to be awe-inspiring but to her eyes merely monolithic.

She was glad when they finally reached Quaisoir's quarters, which for all their absurd ornamentation

were at least humanized by their excesses. And they also heard there the first friendly voice in many hours, though its welcoming tones turned to horror when its owner, Quaisoir's many-tailed handmaiden, Concupiscentia, saw that her mistress had gained a twin and lost her eyes in the night she'd spent looking for salvation. Only after a good deal of lamentation could she be persuaded to tend to Quaisoir, which she did with trembling hands. The comet was by now making its steep ascent, and from Quaisoir's window Jude had a panoramic view of the desolation. She'd heard and seen enough in her short time here to realize that Yzordderex had been ripe for the calamity that had overtaken it, and some in this city, perhaps many, had fanned the fire that had destroyed the Kesparates, calling it a just and cleansing flame. Even Peccable—who hadn't got an anarchist bone in his body—

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had intimated that Yzordderex's time had come. But Jude still mourned its passing. This was the city she'd begged Oscar to show her, whose air had smelled so temptingly spicy, and whose warmth, issuing from the Retreat that day, had seemed paradisiacal. Now she would return to the Fifth Dominion with its ash on her soles and its smuts in her nose, like a tourist back from Venice with pictures of bubbles in a lagoon.

"I'm so tired," Quaisoir said. "Will you mind if I sleep?"

"Of course not," Jude said.

"Is Seidux's blood still on the bed?" she asked Concupiscentia.

"It is, ma'am."

"Then I won't lie there, I think." She put out her arm. "Lead me to the little blue room. I'll sleep there. Judith, you should sleep too. Bathe and sleep. We've got so much to plan together."

"We do?"

"Oh, yes, sister," Quaisoir said. "But later...."

She let Concupiscentia lead her away, leaving Jude to wander through the chambers which Quaisoir had occupied all her years of power. There was indeed a little blood on the sheets, but the bed looked tempting nevertheless, the scent off it dizzyingly strong. She refused its lush blandishments, however, and moved in search of a bathroom, anticipating another chamber of baroque excess. In fact it proved to be the only room in the suite that came within shouting distance of restraint, and she happily lingered there, running a hot bath and soaking some of the ashes out of her body while contemplating her misty reflection in its black tiles.

When she emerged, her skin tingling, the clothes she'd sloughed off—which were filthy and stinking—revolted her. She left them on the floor and, instead, putting on the most subdued of the robes that lay scattered around the bedroom, took to the scented sheets. A man had been killed here only a few hours before, but that thought—which would once have driven her from the room, much less the bed—concerned her not at all. She didn't discount the pos-

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sibility that this disinterest in the bed's sordid past was in part the influence of the scents off the pillow she

laid her head upon. They conspired with fatigue, and with the heat of the bath from which she'd risen, to induce a languor she couldn't have resisted had her life depended upon it. The tension went from her sinews and joints; her belly gave up its jitters. Closing her eyes, she let her sister's bed lull her into dreaming.

Even during his most despondent meditations at the Pivotpit, Sartori had never felt the emptiness of his condition as acutely as he did now that he was parted from his other. Meeting Gentle in the tower and witnessing the Pivot's call to Reconciliation, he'd sensed new possibilities in the air: a marriage of self and self which would heal him into wholeness. But Gentle had poured contempt on that vision, preferring his mystic spouse over his brother. Perhaps he'd change his mind now that Pie 'oh' pah was dead, but Sartori doubted it. If *he* were Gentle—and he was—the mystic's death would be obsessed upon and magnified until such time as it could be revenged. The enmity between them was confirmed. There'd be no reunion.

He shared none of this with Rosengarten, who found him up in the gazebo, guzzling chocolate and musing on his anguish. Nor did he allow Rosengarten to recount the disasters of the night (the generals dead, the army murdered or mutinied) for very long without stopping him. They had plans to lay together, he told the piebald man, and it was little use fretting over what was lost.

"We're going to go to the Fifth, you and I," he informed Rosengarten. "We're going to build a new Yzordderrex."

It wasn't often he'd won a response from the man, but he got one now. Rosengarten smiled.

"The Fifth?" he said.

"I knew it many years ago, of course, but by all accounts it's naked now. The Maestros I knew are dead. Their wisdoms are dishonored. The place is defenseless. We'll take them with such sways they won't even know they've given

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up their Dominion until the New Yzordderrex is in their hearts and inviolate."

Rosengarten made a murmur of approval.

"Make any farewells you have to make," Sartori said. "And I'll make mine."

"We're going now?"

"Before the fires are out," the Autarch said.

It was a strange sleep Jude fell into, but she'd traveled in the country of the unconscious often enough to feel unin-timidated there. This time she didn't move from the room in which she lay but luxuriated in its excesses, rising and falling like the veils around the bed, and on the same smoky breeze. Once in a while she heard some sound from the courtyards far below and allowed her eyes to flutter open for the sheer lazy pleasure of closing them again, and once she was woken by the sound of Concupiscentia's reedy voice as she sang in a distant room. Though the words were incomprehensible, Jude knew it was a lament, full of yearning for things that had passed and could never be again, and she slipped back into sleep with the thought that sad songs were the same in any language, whether Gaelic, Navaho, or

Patashoquan. Like the glyph of her body, this melody was essential, a sign that could pass between Dominions.

The music and the scent she lay upon were potent narcotics, and after a few melancholy verses of Concupiscentia's song she was no longer sure whether she was asleep, and hearing the lament in her dreams, or awake, but freed by Quaisoir's perfumes and wafted up into the folds of silks above her bed like a dreamer. Whichever it was, she scarcely cared. The sensations were pleasurable, and she'd had too little pleasure of late.

Then came proof that this was indeed a dream. A doleful phantom appeared at the door and stood watching her through the veils. She knew him even before he drew close to the bed. This was not a face she'd thought of much in recent times, so it was somewhat strange that she'd conjured him, but conjure him she had, and there was no denying the erotic charge she felt at his dreamed presence. It was

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Gentle, perfectly remembered, his expression troubled the way it so often was, his hands stroking the veils as though they were her legs and could be parted with caresses,

"I didn't think you'd be here," he said to her. His voice was raw, and his expression as full of loss as Concupiscentia's song. "When did you come back?"

"A little while ago."

"You smell so sweet."

"I bathed."

"Looking at you like this...it makes me wish I could take you with me."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the Fifth," he said. "I've come to say goodbye."

"From such a distance?" she said.

His face broke into an immoderate smile, and she remembered, seeing it, how easy seduction had always been for him: how women had slid their wedding rings off and their knickers down when he shone this way. But why bechurlish? This was an erotic whimsey, not a trial. She dreamed that he saw the accusation in her eyes, however, and was begging her forgiveness.

"I know I've done you harm," he said.

"That's in the past," she replied magnanimously.

"Looking at you now..."

"Don't be sentimental," she said. "I don't want sentiment. I want you here."

Opening her legs, she let him see the niche she had for him. He didn't hesitate any longer, but pulled the veil aside and climbed onto the bed, wrenching the robe from her shoulders as he put his mouth against

hers. For some reason, she'd conjured him tasting of chocolate. Another oddity, but not one that spoiled his kisses.

She tugged at his clothes, but they were a dream invention: the dark blue fabric of his shirt, its laces and buttons infetishistic profusion, covered in tiny scales, as though a family of lizards had shed their skins to clothe him.

She was tender from the bath, and when he let his weight descend on her, and began to work his body against hers, the scales pricked her stomach and breasts like the most

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arousing way. She wrapped her legs around him, and he acceded to her capture, his kisses becoming fiercer by the moment.

"The things we've done," he murmured as she kissed his face. "The things we've done...."

Her heart made her mind nimble; it leapt from memory to memory, back to the book she'd found in Estabrook's flat all those months before—one of Oscar's gifts from the Dominions—a manual of sexual possibilities that had shocked her at the time. Images of its couplings appeared in her head now: intimacies that were perhaps only possible in the profligacy of sleep, unknitting both male and female and weaving them together again in new and ecstatic combinations. She put her mouth to her dream lover's ear and whispered to him that she forbade him nothing; that she wanted them to share the most extreme sensations they were capable of inventing. He didn't grin this time, which pleased her, but raised himself up on his hands, which were plunged into the downy pillows to either side of her head, and looked down at her with some of the same sadness he'd had on his face when he'd first arrived.

"One last time?" he said.

"It doesn't have to be the last time," she said. "I can always dream you."

"And me, you," he said with the greatest fondness and courtesy.

She reached down between their bodies and slipped off his belt, then pulled his trousers open with some violence, unwilling to be delayed by his buttons. What filled her hand was as silken as the fabric hiding it was rough: still only half engorged, but all the more entertaining for that. She stroked him. He sighed as he bent his head towards her, licking her tips and teeth, letting his chocolate-sweetened spittle run off his tongue into her mouth. She raised her hips and moved the groove of her sex against the underside of his erection, wetting it. He started to murmur to her, terms of endearment, she presumed, though—like Concupiscentia's song—they were in no language she understood. They sounded as sweet as his spittle, however, and lulled

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her like a cradle song, as though to slip her into a dream within a dream. As her eyes closed she felt him raise his hips, lifting the thickness of his sex from between her labia, and with one thrust, hard enough to stab the breath from her, he entered, dropping down on top of her as he did so.

The endearments ceased; the kisses too. He put one hand on her brow, his fingers laced into her hair, and the other at her neck, his thumb rubbing her windpipe and coaxing sighs from it. She'd forbidden him

nothing and would not rescind that invitation simply because his possession of her was so sudden. Instead, she raised her legs and crossed them behind his back, then started to whip him on with insults. Was this the most he could give her, the deepest he could go? He wasn't hard enough, wasn't hot enough. She wanted more. His thrusts speeded up, his thumb tightening against her throat, but not so much it kept her from drawing breath and expelling it again in a fresh round of provocations.

"I could fuck you forever," he said to her, his tone half-way between devotion and threat. "There's nothing I can't make you do. There's nothing I can't make you say. I could fuck you forever."

This was not talk she would have welcomed from a flesh-and-blood lover, but in a dream it was arousing. She let him continue in the same mode, opening her arms and legs beneath him, while he recited all that he would do to her, a litany of ambition that matched the rhythm of his hips. The room her dream had raised around them split here and there, and another seeped in through the cracks to occupy the same space: this one darker than Quai-soir's veil-draped chamber and lit by a fire that blazed off to her left. Her dream lover didn't fade, however; he remained with her and in her, more frenzied in his thrusts and promises than ever. She saw him above her as if lit by the same flames that warmed her nakedness, his face knotted and sweaty, his index of desires coming between clenched teeth. She would be his doll, his whore, his wife, his Goddess; he would fill every hole of her, forever and ever: own her, worship her, turn her inside out. Hearing this, she remembered the im-

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ages in Estabrook's book again, and the memory made her cells swell as if each was a tiny bud ready to burst, their petals pleasure, their scent the shouts she was making, rising off her to draw fresh adoration from him. It came, cruel and exquisite by turns. One moment he wanted to be her prisoner, bound to her every whim, nourished on her shit and the milk he'd win from her breasts with suckling. The next she was less than the excrement he'd hungered for, and he was her only hope for life. He'd resurrect her with his fuck. He'd fill her with a fiery stream, till her eyes were washed from her head and she drowned in him. There was more, but her cries of pleasure were mounting with every moment, and she heard less and less. Saw less too, closing her eyes against the mingled rooms, fire-lit and veiled, letting her head fill with the geometries that always attended pleasure, forms like her glyph unraveled and reworked.

And then, just as she was reaching the first of the peaks—a range of stratospheric heights ahead—she felt him shudder and his thrusts stop. She didn't believe he'd finished, not at first. This was a dream, and she'd conjured him to perform the way actualities never did: to go on when lovers of flesh and blood had spilled their promises and were panting their apologies beside her. He couldn't desert her now! She opened her eyes. The fire-lit chamber had gone, and the flames in Gentle's eyes had gone with it. He had already withdrawn, and all she felt between her legs was his fingers, dabbling in the dribble he'd supplied. He looked at her lazily.

"You almost tempt me to stay," he said, "But I've got work to do."

Work? What work did dreams have besides the dreamer's commandments?

"Don't leave," she demanded.

"I'm done," he said.

He was getting off the bed. She reached for him, but even in sleep the languor of the pillow was upon her, and he was away between the veils before her fingers came close to catching hold. She sank back in a

slow swoon, watching his

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figure become remoter as the layers of gossamer between them multiplied.

"Stay beautiful," he told her. "Maybe I'll come back for you when I've built the New Yzordderrex."

This made little sense to her, but she didn't care. It was her own wretched invention, and worthless. She let it go, the figure seeming to halt at the door as if for one backward glance, then disappearing altogether. Her mind had no sooner let him slip than it conjured a compensation, however. The veils at the bottom of the bed parted and the many-tailed Concupiscentia appeared, her eyes bright with craving. She didn't wait for any word to pass between them but crawled up onto the bed, her gaze fixed on Judith's groin, her bluish tongue flicking as she approached. Jude raised her knees. The creature put her head down and began to lick out what the dream lover had left, her silk palms caressing Jude's thighs. The sensation soothed her, and she watched through the slits of her drugged eyes as Concupiscentia bathed her clean. Before she'd finished the dream grew dimmer, and the creature was still at its caressing work when another veil descended, this so dense she lost both sight and sensation in its folds.

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I

Like galleons turned to the desert wind and in full sail before it, the tents of the Dearthers presented a pretty spectacle from a distance, but Gentle's admiration turned to awe as the car drew closer and their scale became apparent. They were the height of five-story houses and more, billowing towers of ochre and scarlet fabric, the colors all the more vivid given that the desert floor, which had been sand-colored at the outset, was now almost black, and the heavens they rose against were gray, being the wall between the

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Second Dominion and the unknown world haunted by Hapexamendios.

Floccus halted the car a quarter of a mile from the perimeter of the encampment. "I should go ahead," he said, "and explain who we are and what we're doing here."

"Make it quick," Gentle told him.

Floccus was away like a gazelle, over ground that was no longer sand but a flinty carpet of stone shards, like the clippings from some stupendous sculpture. Gentle looked at the mystic, lying in his arms as if in a charmed sleep, its brow innocent of frowns. He stroked its cold cheek.

How many friends and loved ones must he have seen pass away in the two centuries and more of his life on earth? Though he'd wiped those griefs from his conscious mind, could he doubt they'd made their mark, fueling his terror of sickness and hardening his heart over the years? Perhaps he'd always been a philanderer and plagiarist, a master of counterfeited emotion, but was that so surprising in a man who knew in his gut that the drama, however soul-searing, was cyclic? The faces changed and changed, but the story remained essentially the same. As Klein had been fond of pointing out, there was no such thing as originality. It had all been said before, suffered before. If a man knew that, was it any wonder love

became mechanical and death just ascene to be shunned? There was no absolute knowledge to be gained from either. Just another ride on the merry-go-round, another blurred scene of faces smiling and faces grieved.

But his feelings for the mystif had been no sham, and with good reason. In Pie's self-denials ("I'm nothing and nobody," it had said at the beginning) he'd heard an echo of the anguish he himself felt; and in Pie's gaze, so heavy with the freight of years, seen a comrade soul who understood the nameless pain he carried. It had stripped him of his shams and chicanery and given him a taste of the Maestro he'd been and might be again. There was good to be done with such power, he now knew: breaches to be healed, rights to be restored, nations to be roused, and hopes re-

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awakened. He needed his inspiration beside him if he was to be a great Reconciler.

"I love you, Pie 'oh' pah," he murmured.

"Gentle."

The voice was Floccus', calling him from outside the window.

"I've seen Athanasius. He says we're to come straight in."

"Good! Good!" Gentle threw open the door.

"Do you want help?"

"No. I'll carry Pie." He got out, then reached back into the car and picked up the mystif.

"Gentle, you do understand that this is a sacred place?" Floccus said as he led the way towards the tents.

"No singing, dancing, or farting, huh? Don't look so pained, Floccus. I understand."

As they approached, Gentle realized that what he'd taken to be an encampment of closely gathered tents was in fact a continuum, the various pavilions, with their swooping roofs, joined by smaller tents to form a single golden beast of wind and canvas.

Inside its body, the gusts kept everything in motion. Tremors moved through even the most tautly erected walls, and in the heights of the roof swaths of fabric whirled like the skirts of dervishes, giving off a constant sigh. There were people up among the folds, some walking on webs of rope as if they were solid board, others sitting in front of immense windows opened in the roof, their faces turned to the wall of the First World as though they anticipated a summons out of that place at any moment. If such a summons came, there'd be no hectic rush. The atmosphere was as measured and soothing as the motion of the dancing sails above.

"Where do we find the doctor?" Gentle asked Floccus. "There is no doctor," he replied. "Follow me. We've been given a place to lay the mystif down."

"There must be some kind of medical attendants." "There's fresh water and clothes. Maybe some laudanum and the like. But Pie's beyond that. The uredo won't be dis-

lodged with medications. It's the proximity of the First Dominion that'll heal it."

"Then we should go outside right now," he said. "Get Pie closer to the Erasure."

"Any closer than this would take more resilience than either you or I possess, Gentle," Floccus said. "Now follow me, and be respectful of this place."

He led Gentle through the beast's tremulous body to a smaller tent, where a dozen plain low beds were set, some occupied, most not. Gentle laid the mystif down in one and proceeded to unbutton its shirt while Floccus went in search of cool water for its now-burning skin and some sustenance for Gentle and himself. While he waited, Gentle examined the spread of the uredo, which was too extensive to be fully examined without stripping Pie completely, which he was loath to do with so many strangers in the vicinity. The mystif had been covetous of its privacy—it had been many weeks before Gentle had glimpsed its beauty naked—and he wanted to respect that modesty, even in Pie's present condition. In fact, very few of those who passed by even glanced their way, and after a time he began to feel the fear lose its grip on him. There was very little more that he could do. They were at the edge of the known Dominions, where all maps stopped and the enigma of enigmas began. What use was fear in the face of such imponderables? He had to put it aside and proceed with dignity and containment, trusting to the powers that occupied the air here.

When Floccus returned with the means to wash Pie, Gentle asked if he might be left alone to do so.

"Of course," Floccus replied. "I've got friends here. I'd like to seek them out."

When he left, Gentle began to bathe the suppurating eruptions of the uredo, which oozed not blood but a silvery pus, the smell of which pricked his sinuses like ammonia. The body it fed upon seemed not only enfeebled but somehow unfocused, as though its contours and musculature were about to become a vapor, and the flesh disperse. Whether this was the uredo's doing or simply the condition of a mystif when life, and therefore its capacity to shape the

sight of those gazing upon it, was fading, Gentle didn't know, but it made him think back over the way this body had appeared to him. As Judith, of course; as an assassin, armored in nakedness; and as the loving androgyne of their wedding night in the Cradle, that had momentarily taken his face and stared back at him like a prophecy of Sartori. Now, finally, it seemed to be a form of burnished mist, receding from his hand even as he touched it.

"Gentle? Is that you? I didn't know you could see in the dark."

Gentle looked up from Pie's body to find that in the time he'd been washing the mystif, half mesmerized by memory, the evening had fallen. There were lights burning at the bedsides of those nearby, but none near Pie 'oh' pah. When he returned his gaze to the body he'd been washing, it was barely discernible in the gloom.

"I didn't know I could either."

He stood up to greet the newcomer. It was Athanasius, a lamp in his hand. By its flame, which was as

subject to the wind's whim as the canvas overhead, Gentle saw he'd been wounded in the fall of Yzordderrex. There were several cuts on his face and neck and a larger, livid injury on his belly. For a man who'd celebrated Sundays by making himself a crown of thorns, these were probably welcome discomforts.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to welcome you earlier," he said. "But with such numbers of casualties coming in I spend a lot of time administering last rites."

Gentle didn't remark on this, but the fear crept back up his spine.

"We've had a lot of the Autarch's soldiers find their way here, and that makes me nervous. I'm afraid we'll let in someone on a suicide mission, and he'll blow the place apart. That's the way the bastard thinks. If he's destroyed, he'll want to bring everything down with him."

"I'm sure he's much more concerned with making his getaway," Gentle said.

"Where can he go? The word's already spread across the Imajica. There's an armed uprising in Patashoqua. There's

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hand-to-hand combat on the Lenten Way. Every Dominion's shaking. Even the First."

"The First? How?"

"Haven't you seen? No, obviously you haven't. Come with me."

Gentle glanced back towards Pie.

"The mystic's safe here," Athanasius said. "We won't belong."

He led Gentle through the body of the beast to a door that took them out into the deepening dusk. Though Floc-cus had counseled against what they were doing, hinting that the Erasure's proximity could do harm, there was no sign of any consequence. He was either protected by Athanasius or resistant to any malign influence on his own account. Either way, he was able to study the spectacle laid before him without ill effect.

There was no wall of fog, or even deeper twilight, to mark the division between the Second Dominion and the haunt of Hapexamendios. The desert simply faded away into nothingness, like a drawing erased by the power on the other side, first becoming unfocused, then losing its color and its detail. This subtle removal of solid reality, the world wiped away and replaced with nothing, was the most distressing sight Gentle had ever set eyes on. Nor was the similarity between what was happening here and the state of Pie's body lost on him.

"You said the Erasure was moving," Gentle whispered.

Athanasius scanned the emptiness, looking for some sign, but nothing caught his eye.

"It's not constant," he said. "But every now and then ripples appear in it." "Is that rare?"

"There are accounts of this happening in earlier times, but this isn't an area that encourages accurate study. Ob?servers get poetic here. Scientists turn to sonnets. Some?times literally." He laughed. "That was a joke, by the way. Just in case you start worrying about your legs rhyming."

"How does looking at this make you feel?" Gentle asked him.

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"Afraid," Athanasius said. "Because I'm not ready to bethere."

"Nor am I," Gentle said. "But I'm afraid Pie is. I wish I'd never come, Athanasius. Maybe I should take Pie away now, while I still can."

"That's your decision," Athanasius replied. "But I don't believe the mystif will survive if you move it. A uredo's a terrible poison, Gentle. If there's any chance of Pie being healed, it's here, close to the First."

Gentle looked back towards the distressing absence of the Erasure.

"Is going to nothing being healed?" he said. "It seems more like death to me."

"They may be closer than we think, death and healing," Athanasius said.

"I don't want to hear that," Gentle said. "Are you stay?ing out here?"

"For a while," Athanasius replied. "If you do decide to go, come and find me first, will you, so that we can say good?bye?"

"Of course."

He left Athanasius to his void-watching and went back inside, thinking as he did so that this would be a fine time to find a bar and order up a stiff drink. As he started back in the direction of Pie's bed, he was brought to a halt by a voice too abrasive for this hallowed place, and sufficiently slurred to suggest the speaker had found a bar himself and drunk it dry.

"Gentle, you old bugger!"

Estabrook stepped into view, grinning expansively, though several of his teeth were missing.

"I heard you were here and I didn't believe it." He seized Gentle's hand and shook it. "But here you are, large as life. Who'd have thought it, eh? The two of us, here."

Life in the encampment had wrought its changes on Charlie. He could scarcely have been further from the grief-wasted plotter Gentle had met on Kite Hill. Indeed, he could almost have passed for a clown, with his motley of pin-stripe trousers, tattered braces, and unbuttoned tunic

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died half a dozen colors, all crowned with bald head and gap-toothed smile.

"It's so good to see you!" he kept saying, his pleasure unalloyed. "We must talk. This is the perfect time."

They're all going outside to meditate on their ignorance, which is fine for a few minutes, but God! it gets drab. Come with me, come on! They've given me a little nook of my own, to keep me out of the way."

"Maybe later," Gentle said. "I've got a friend here who's sick."

"I heard somebody talking about that. A mystic? Is that the word?"

"That's the word."

"They're extraordinary, I heard. Very sexy. Why don't I come and see the patient with you?"

Gentle had no wish to keep Estabrook's company for longer than he needed to, but suspected that the man would beat a hasty retreat as soon as he set eyes on Pie and realized the creature he'd come to gawk at was the same he'd hired to assassinate his wife. They went back to Pie's bedside together. Floccus was there, with a lamp and an ample supply of food. Mouth crammed, he rose to be introduced, but Estabrook barely noticed him. His gaze was on Pie, whose head was turned away from the brightness of the lamp in the direction of the First Dominion.

"You lucky bugger," he said to Gentle. "She's beautiful."

Floccus glanced at Gentle to see if he intended to remark on Estabrook's error in sexing the patient, but Gentle made a tiny shake of his head. He was surprised that Pie's power to respond to the gaze of others was still intact, especially as his eyes saw an altogether more distressing sight: the substance of his beloved growing more insubstantial as the hours passed. Was this a sight and understanding reserved for Maestros? He knelt beside the bed and studied the fading features on the pillow. Pie's eyes were roving beneath the lids.

"Dreaming of me?" Gentle murmured.

"Is she getting better?" Estabrook inquired.

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"I don't know," Gentle said. "This is supposed to be a healing place, but I'm not so sure."

"I really think we should talk," Estabrook said, with the strained nonchalance of a man who had something vital to impart, but was not able to do so in present company. "Why don't you pop along with me and have a quick drink? I'm sure Floccus will come and find you if anything untoward happens."

Floccus chewed on, nodding in accord with this, and Gentle agreed to go, hoping Estabrook had some insight into conditions here that would help him to decide whether to go or stay.

"I'll be five minutes," he promised Floccus, and let Estabrook lead him off through the lamp-lit passages to what he'd earlier called his nook.

It was off the beaten track somewhat, a little canvas room he'd made his own with what few possessions he'd brought from Earth. A shirt, its bloodstains now brown, hung above the bed like the tattered standard from some noteworthy battle. On the table beside the bed his wallet, his comb, a box of matches, and a roll of mints had been arranged, along several symmetrical columns of change, into an altar to the spirit of the pocket.

"It's not much," Estabrook said, "but it's home."

"Are you a prisoner here?" Gentle said as he sat in the plain chair at the bottom of the bed.

"Not at all," Estabrook said.

He brought a small bottle of liquor out from under the pillow. Gentle recognized it from the hours he and Huzzah had lingered in the cafe in the Oke T'Noon. It was the fermented sap of a swamp flower from the Third Dominion: kloupo. Estabrook took a swig from the bottle, reminding Gentle of how he'd supped brandy from a flask on Kite Hill. He'd refused the man's liquor that day, but not now.

"I could go anytime I wanted to," he went on. "But I think to myself, Where would you go, Charlie? And where *would* I go?"

"Back to the Fifth?"

"In God's name, why?"

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"Don't you miss it, even a little?"

"A little, maybe. Once in a while I get maudlin, I suppose, and then I get drunk—drunker—and I have dreams."

"Of what?"

"Mostly childhood things, you know. Odd little details that wouldn't mean a damn thing to anyone else." He reclaimed the bottle and drank again. "But you can't have the past back, so what's the use of breaking your heart? When things are gone, they're gone."

Gentle made a noncommittal noise.

"You don't agree."

"Not necessarily."

"Name one thing that stays."

"I don't—"

"No, go on. Name *one* thing."

"Love."

"Ha! Well, that certainly brings us full circle, doesn't it? Love! You know, I'd have agreed with you half a year ago. I can't deny that. I couldn't conceive of ever being out of love with Judith. But I am. When I think back to the way I felt about her, it seems ludicrous. Now, of course, it's Oscar's turn to be obsessed by her. First you, then me, then Oscar. But he won't survive long."

"What makes you say that?"

"He's got his fingers in too many pies. It'll end in tears, you see if it doesn't. You know about the Tabula Rasa, I suppose?"

"No."

"Why should you?" Estabrook replied. "You were dragged into this, weren't you? I feel guilty about that, I really do. Not that my feeling guilty's going to do either of us much good, but I want you to know I never understood the ramifications of what I was doing. If I had, I swear I'd have left Judith alone."

"I don't think either of us would have been capable of that," Gentle remarked.

"Leaving her alone? No, I don't suppose we would. Our paths were already beaten for us, eh? I'm not saying I'm a total innocent, mind you. I'm not. I've done some pretty

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wretched things in my time, things I squirm to think about. But compared with the Tabula Rasa, or a mad bastard like Sartori, I'm not so bad. And when I look out every morning, into God's Nowhere—"Is that what they call it?"

"Oh, hell, no; they're much more reverential. That's my little nickname. But when I look out at it, I think, Well, it's going to take us all one of these days, whoever we are: mad bastards, lovers, drunkards, it's not going to pick and choose. We'll all go to nothing sooner or later. And you know, maybe it's my age, but that doesn't worry me any longer. We all have our time, and when it's over, it's over."

"There must be something on the other side, Charlie," Gentle said.

Estabrook shook his head. "That's all guff," he said. "I've seen a lot of people get up and walk into the Erasure, praying and carrying on. They take a few steps and they're gone. It's like they'd never lived."

"But people are healed here. You were."

"Oscar certainly made a mess of me, and I didn't die. But I don't know whether being here had much to do with that. Think about it. If God really was on the other side of that wall, and He was so damn eager to heal the sick, don't you think He'd reach out a little further and stop what's going on in Yzordderrex? Why would He put up with horrors like that, right under His nose? No, Gentle. I call it God's No?where, but that's only half-right. God isn't there. Maybe He was once...."

He trailed away and filled the silence with another throatful of kloupo.

"Thank you for this," Gentle said.

"What is there to thank me for?"

"You've helped me to make up my mind about some?thing."

"My pleasure," Estabrook said. "It's damn difficult to think straight, isn't it, with this bloody wind blowing all the time? Can you find your way back to that lovely lady of yours, or shall I go with you?"

"I'll find my way," Gentle replied.

He rapidly regretted declining Estabrook's offer, discovering after turning a few corners that one lamp-lit passageway looked much like the next, and that not only could he not retrace his steps to Pie's bedside, he couldn't be certain of finding his way back to Estabrook either.

One route he tried brought him into a kind of chapel, where several Dearthers were kneeling facing a window that gave onto God's Nowhere. The Erasure presented in what was now total darkness the same blank face it had by dusk, lighter than the night but shedding none upon it, its nullity more disturbing than the atrocities of Beatrix or thesealed rooms of the palace.

Turning his back on both window and worshipers, Gentle continued his search for Pie, and accident finally brought him back into what he thought was the room where the mystif lay. The bed was empty, however. Disoriented, he was about to go and quiz one of the other patients to confirm that he had the right room when he caught sight of Floccus' meal, or what was left of it, on the floor beside the bed: a few crusts, half a dozen well-picked bones. There could be no doubt that this was indeed Pie's bed. But where was the occupant? He turned to look at the others. They were all either asleep or comatose, but he was determined to have the truth of this, and was crossing to the nearest bed, when he heard Floccus running in pursuit, calling after him.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you."

"Pie's bed is empty, Floccus."

"I know, I know. I went to empty my bladder—I was away two minutes, no more—and when I got back it had gone. The mystif, not my bladder. I thought maybe you'd come and taken it away."

"Why would I do that?"

"Don't get angry. There's no harm going to come to it here. Trust me."

After his discussion with Estabrook, Gentle was by no

means certain this was true, but he wasn't going to waste time arguing with Floccus while Pie was wandering unattended.

"Where have you looked?" he asked-

"All around,"

"Can't you be a little more precise?"

"I got lost," Floccus said, becoming exasperated. "All the tents look alike."

"Did you go outside?"

"No, why?" Floccus' agitation sank from sight. What surfaced instead was deep dismay. "You don't think it's gone to the Erasure?"

"We won't know till we look," Gentle said. "Which way did Athanasius take me? There was a door—"

"Wait! Wait!" Floccus said, snatching hold of Gentle's jacket. "You can't just step out there."

"Why not? I'm a Maestro, aren't I?"

"There are ceremonies—"

"I don't give a shit," Gentle said, and without waiting for further objections from Floccus, he headed off in what he hoped was the right direction.

Floccus followed, trotting beside Gentle, opening new arguments against what Gentle was planning with every fourth or fifth step. The Erasure was restless tonight, he said, there was talk of ruptures in it; to wander in its vicinity when it was so volatile was dangerous, possibly suicidal; and besides, it was a desecration. Gentle might be a Maestro, but it didn't give him the right to ignore the etiquette of what he was planning. He was a guest, invited in on the understanding that he obey the rules. And rules weren't written for the fun of it. There were good reasons to keep strangers from trespassing there. They were ignorant, and ignorance could bring disaster on everybody.

"What's the use of rules, if nobody really understands what's going on out there?" Gentle said.

"But we do! We understand this place. It's where God begins."

"So if the Erasure kills me, you know what to write in my obituary. 'Gentle ended where God begins.' "

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"This isn't funny, Gentle."

"Agreed."

"It's life or death."

"Agreed."

"So why are you doing it?"

"Because wherever Pie is, that's where I belong. And I would have thought even someone as half-sighted and short-witted as you would have seen that!"

"You mean shortsighted and halfwitted."

"You said it."

Ahead lay the door he and Athanasius had stepped through. It was open and unguarded.

"I just want to say—" Floccus began.

"Leave it alone, Floccus."

"—it's been too short a friendship," the man replied, bringing Gentle to a halt, shamed by his outburst.

"Don't mourn me yet," he said softly.

Floccus made no reply, but backed away from the open door, leaving Gentle to step through it alone. The night outside was hushed, the wind having dropped to little more than a breeze. He scanned the terrain, left and right. There were worshipers in both directions, kneeling in the gloom, their heads bowed as they meditated on God's Nowhere. Not wishing to disturb them, he moved as quietly as he could over the uneven ground, but the smaller shards of rock ahead of him skipped and rolled as he approached, as though to announce him with their rattle and clatter. This was not the only response to his presence. The air he exhaled, which he'd turned to killing use so many times now, darkened as it left his lips, the cloud shot through with threads of bright scarlet. They didn't disperse, these breaths, but sank as though weighed down by their own lethality, wrapping around his torso and legs like funeral robes. He made no attempt to shrug them off, even though their folds soon concealed the ground and slowed his step. Nor did he have to puzzle much over their purpose. Now that he was unaccompanied by Athanasius, the air was determined to deny him the defense of walking here as an innocent, as a man in pursuit of an errant lover. Wrapped in

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black and attended by drums, his profounder nature was here revealed: he was a Maestro with a murderous power at his lips, and there would be no concealing that fact, either from the Erasure or from those who were meditating upon it.

Several of the worshipers had been stirred from their contemplations by the sound of the stones and now looked up to see they had an ominous figure in their midst. One, kneeling alone close to Gentle's path, rose in panic and fled, uttering a prayer of protection. Another fell prostrate, sobbing. Rather than intimidate them further with his gaze, Gentle turned his eyes on God's Nowhere, scouring the ground close to the margin of solid earth and void for some sign of Pie 'oh' pah. The sight of the Erasure no longer distressed him as it had when he'd first stepped out here with Athanasius. Clothed as he was, and thus announced, he came before the void as a man of power. For him to have attempted the rites of Reconciliation, he must have made his peace with this mystery. He had nothing to fear from it.

By the time he set eyes on Pie 'oh' pah he was three or four hundred yards from the door, and the assembly of meditators had thinned to a brave few who'd wandered from the main knot of the congregation in search of solitude. Some had already retreated, seeing him approach, but a stoical few kept their praying places and let this stranger pass by without so much as glancing up at him. Now so folded in sable breath he feared Pie would not recognize him, Gentle began to call the mystic's name. The call went unacknowledged. Though the mystic's head was no more than a dark blur in the murk, Gentle knew what his hungry eyes were fixed upon: the enigma that was coaxing its steady step the way a cliff edge might coax a suicide. He picked up his pace, his momentum moving steadily larger stones as he went. Though there was no sign that the mystic was in any hurry, he feared that once it was in the equivocal region between solid ground and nothingness, it would be irretrievable.

"Pie!" he yelled as he went. "Can you hear me? Please, stop!"

The words went on clouding and clothing him, but they had no effect upon Pie until Gentle turned his requests into an order.

"Pie 'oh' pah. This is your Maestro. Stop."

The mystif stumbled as Gentle spoke, as though his demand had put an obstacle in its way. A small, almost bestial sound of pain escaped it. But it did as its sometime summoner had ordered and stopped in its tracks like a dutiful servant, waiting until the Maestro reached its side.

Gentle was within ten paces, now, and saw how far advanced the process of unknitting was. The mystif was barely more than a shadow among shadows, its features impossible to read, its body insubstantial. If Gentle needed any further proof that the Erasure was not a place of healing, it was in the sight of the uredo, which was more solid than the body it had fed upon, its livid stains intermittently brightening like embers caught by a gusting wind.

"Why did you leave your bed?" Gentle said, his paces slowed once again as he approached the mystif. Its form seemed so tenuous he feared any violent motion might disperse it entirely. "There's nothing beyond the Erasure you need, Pie. Your life's here, with me."

The mystif took a little time to reply. When it did its voice was as ethereal as its substance, a slender, exhausted plea emerging from a spirit at the edge of total collapse.

"I don't have any life left, Maestro," it said.

"Let me be the judge of that. I swore to myself I wouldn't let you go again, Pie. I want to look after you, make you well. Bringing you here was a mistake, I see that now. I'm sorry if it's brought you pain, but I'll take you away—"

"It wasn't a mistake. You found your way here for your own reasons."

"You're my reason, Pie. I didn't know who I was till you found me, and I'll forget myself again if you go."

"No, you won't," it said, the dubious outline of its head turning in Gentle's direction. Though there was no gleam to mark the place where its eyes had been, Gentle knew it was looking at him. "You're the Maestro Sartori. The Reconciler of the Imajica." It faltered for a long moment. When

its voice came again, it was frailer than ever. "And you are also my master, and my husband, and my dearest brother.... If you order me to stay, then I will stay. But if you love me, Gentle, then please... let... me... go."

The request could scarcely have been made more simply or more eloquently, and had Gentle known without question there was an Eden on the other side of the Erasure, ready to receive Pie's spirit, he would have let the mystif go there and then, agonizing as it would be. But he believed differently and was ready to say it, even in such proximity to

the void.

"It's not heaven, Pie. Maybe God's there, maybe not.

But until we know—"

"Why not just let me go now and see for myself? I'm not afraid. This is the Dominion where my people were made. I want to see it." In these words there was the first hint of passion Gentle had so far heard. "I'm dying, Maestro. I need to lie down and sleep."

"What if there's nothing there, Pie? What if it's only emptiness?"

"I'd prefer the absence to the pain." The reply defeated Gentle utterly. "Then you'd better go," he said, wishing he could find some more tender way to relinquish his hold, but unable to conceal his desolation with platitudes. However much he wanted to save Pie from suffering, his sympathy could not outweigh the need he felt, nor quite annul the sense of ownership which, however unsavory, was a part of what he felt towards this creature.

"I wish we could have taken this last journey together, Maestro," Pie said. "But you've got work to do, I know. Great work."

"And how do I do it without you?" Gentle said, knowing this was a wretched gambit—and half ashamed of it—but unwilling to let the mystic pass from life without voicing every desire he knew to keep it from going.

"You're not alone," Pie said, "You've met Tick Raw and Scopique. They were both members of the last Synod, and they're ready to work the Reconciliation with you." "They're Maestros?"

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"They are now. They were novices the last time, but they're prepared now. They'll work in their Dominions while you work in the Fifth."

"They waited all this time?"

"They knew you'd come. Or, if not you, somebody in your place."

He'd treated them both so badly, he thought, Tick Raw especially.

"Who'll represent the Second?" he said. "And the First?"

"There was a Eurhetemec in Yzordderrex, waiting to work for the Second, but he's dead. He was old the last time, and he couldn't wait. I asked Scopique to find a replacement."

"And here?"

"I'd hoped that honor might fall to me, but now you'll need to find someone in my place. Don't look so lost, Maestro, please. You were a great Reconciler—"

"I failed. How great is that?"

"You won't fail again."

"I don't even know the ceremonies."

"You'll remember, after a time."

"How?"

"All that we did and said and felt is still waiting in GamutStreet. All our preparations, all our debates. Even me."

"Memory isn't enough, Pie."

"I know...."

"I want you real. I want you ... forever."

"Maybe, when the Imajica is whole again and the FirstDominion opens, you'll find me."

There was some tiny hope in that, he thought, though whether it would be enough to keep him from despair when the mystif had disappeared he didn't know.

"May I go?" Pie said.

Gentle had never uttered a harder syllable than his next. "Yes," he said.

The mystif raised its hand, which was no more than a five-fingered wisp of smoke, and put it against Gentle's lips.

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He felt no physical contact, but his heart jumped in his chest.

"We're not lost," Pie said. "Trust in that." Then the fingers dropped away, and the mystif started from Gentle's side towards the Erasure. There were perhaps a dozen yards to cover, and as the gap diminished Gentle's heart, already pounding after Pie's touch, beat faster, its drum tolling in his head. Even now, knowing he couldn't rescind the freedom he'd granted, it was all he could do not to pursue the mystif and delay it just another moment: to hear its voice, to stand beside it, to be the shadow of its shadow.

It didn't glance back, but stepped with cruel ease into the no-man's-land between solidity and nothingness. Gentle refused to look away but stared on with a steadfastness more defiant than heroic. The place was well named. As the mystif walked it was erased, like a sketch that had served its Creator's purpose and was no longer needed on the page. But unlike the sketch, which however fastidiously erased always left some trace to mark the artist's error, when Pie finally disappeared the vanishing was complete, leaving the spot flawless. If Gentle had not had the mystif in his memory—that unreliable book—it might never have existed.

When he returned inside, it was to meet the stares of fifty or more people gathered at the door, all of whom had obviously witnessed what had just happened, albeit at some distance. Nobody so much as coughed until he'd passed; then he heard the whispers rise like the sound of swarming insects. Did they have nothing better to do than gossip about his grief? he thought. The sooner he was away from here, the better. He'd say his farewells to Estabrook and Floccus and leave immediately.

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He returned to Pie's bed, hoping the mystif might have left some keepsake for him, but the only sign of its presence was the indentation in the pillow on which its beautiful head had lain. He longed to lie there himself for a little time, but it was too public for such an indulgence. He would grieve when he was away from here.

As he prepared to leave, Floccus appeared, his wiry little body twitching like a boxer anticipating a blow.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said.

"I was coming to find you anyway," Gentle said. "Just to say thank you, and goodbye."

"Before you go," Floccus said, blinking maniacally, "I've a message for you." He'd sweated all the color from his face and stumbled over every other word.

"I'm sorry for my behavior," Gentle said, trying to soothe him. "You did all you could have done, and all you got for it was my foul temper,"

"No need to apologize."

"Pie had to go, and I have to stay. That's the way of it."

"It's a pleasure to have you back," Floccus gushed. "Really, Maestro, really."

That *Maestro* gave Gentle a clue to this performance. "Floccus? Are you afraid of me?" he said. "You are, aren't you?"

"Afraid? Ah, well—ah, yes. In a manner of speaking. Yes. What happened out there, your getting so close to the Erasure and not being claimed, and the way you've changed"—the dark garb still clung about him, he realized, its slow dispersal draping shreds of smoke around his limbs—"it puts a different complexion on things. I hadn't understood; forgive me, it was stupid; I hadn't understood, you know, that I was in the company of, well, such a power. If I, you know, caused any offense—"

"You didn't."

"I can be frivolous."

"You were fine company, Floccus."

"Thank you, Maestro. Thank you. Thank you."

"Please stop thanking me."

"Yes. I will. Thank you."

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"You said you had a message."

"I did? I did."

"Who from?"

"Athanasius. He'd like very much to see you."

Here was the third farewell he owed, Gentle thought. "Then take me to him, if you would," he said, and Floccus, his face flooded with relief that he'd survived this interview, turned and led him from the empty bed.

In the few minutes it took for them to thread their way through the body of the tent, the wind, which had dropped almost to nothing at twilight, began to rise with fresh ferocity. By the time Floccus ushered him into the chamber where Athanasius waited, it was beating at the walls wildly. The lamps on the floor flickered with each gust, and by their panicky light Gentle saw what a melancholy place Athanasius had chosen for their parting. The chamber was a mortuary, its floor littered with bodies wrapped in every kind of rag and shroud, some neatly parceled, most barely covered: further proof—as if it were needed—of how poor a place of healing this was. But that argument was academic now. This was neither the time nor the place to bruise the man's faith, not with the night wind thrashing at the walls and the dead everywhere underfoot.

"Do you want me to stay?" Floccus asked Athanasius, clearly desperate to be shunned.

"No, no. Go by all means," the other replied. Floccus turned to Gentle and made a little bow. "It was an honor, sir," he said, then beat a hasty retreat.

When Gentle looked back towards Athanasius, the man had wandered to the far end of the mortuary and was staring down at one of the shrouded bodies. He had dressed for this somber place, the loose bright garb he'd been wearing earlier discarded in favor of robes so deep a blue they were practically black.

"So, Maestro," he said. "I was looking for a Judas in our midst and I missed you. That was careless, eh?"

His tone was conversational, which made a statement Gentle already found confusing doubly so.

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"What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean you tricked your way into our tents, and now you expect to depart without paying a price for your desecration."

"There was no trick," Gentle said. "The mystic was sick, and I thought it could be healed here. If I failed

to observe the formalities out there, you'll excuse me. I didn't have time to take a theology lesson."

"The mystic was never sick. Or if it was you sickened it yourself, so you could worm your way in here. Don't even bother to protest. I saw what you did out there. What's the mystic going to do, make some report on us to the Un-beheld?"

"What are you accusing me of exactly?"

"Do you even come from the Fifth, I find myself wondering, or is that also part of the plot?"

"There is no plot."

"Only I've heard that revolution and theology are bad bedfellows there, which of course seems strange to us. How can one ever be separated from the other? If you want to change even a little part of your condition, you must expect the consequences to reach the ears of divinities sooner or later, and then you must have your reasons ready."

Gentle listened to all of this, wondering if it might not be simplest to quit the room and leave Athanasius to ramble. Clearly none of this really made any sense. But he owed the man a little patience, perhaps, if only for the words of wisdom he'd bestowed at the wedding.

"You think I'm involved in some conspiracy," Gentle said. "Is that it?"

"I think you're a murderer, a liar, and an agent of the Autarch," Athanasius said,

"You call *me* a liar? Who's the one who seduced all these poor fuckers into thinking they could be healed here, you or me? Look at them!" He pointed along the rows. "You call this healing? I don't. And if they had the breath—"

He reached down and snatched the shroud off the corpse closest to him. The face beneath was that of a pretty woman. Her open eyes were glazed. So was her face:

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painted and glazed. Carved, painted, and glazed. He tugged the sheet farther back, hearing Athanasius' hard, humorless laugh as he did so. The woman had a painted child perched in the crook of her arm. There was a gilded halo around its head, and its tiny hand was raised in benediction.

"She may lie very still," Athanasius said. "But don't be deceived. She's not dead,"

Gentle went to another of the bodies and drew back its covering. Beneath lay a second Madonna, this one more baroque than the first, its eyes turned up in a beatific swoon. He let the shroud drop from between his fingers.

"Feeling weak, Maestro?" Athanasius said. "You conceal your fear very well, but you don't deceive me."

Gentle looked around the room again. There were at least thirty bodies laid out here. "Are all of them Madonnas?" he said.

Reading Gentle's bewilderment as anxiety, Athanasius said, "Now I begin to see the fear. This ground is

sacred to the Goddess. "Why?"

"Because tradition says a great crime was committed against Her sex near this spot. A woman from the Fifth Dominion was raped hereabouts, and the spirit of the Holy Mother calls sacred any ground thus marked." He went down on his haunches and uncovered another of the statues, touching it reverentially. "She's with us here," he said. "In every statue. In every stone. In every gust of wind. She blesses us, because we dare to come so close to Her enemy's Dominion."

"What enemy?"

"Are you not allowed to utter his name without dropping to your knees?" Athanasius said. "Hapexamendios. Your Lord, the Unbeheld. You can confess it. Why not? You know my secret now, and I know yours. We're transparent to each other. I do have one question, however, before you leave." "What's that?"

"How did you find out we worship the Goddess? Was it Floccus who told you or Nikaetomaas?"

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"Nobody. I didn't know and I don't much care." He started to walk towards the man. "I'm not afraid of your Virgins, Athanasius."

He chose one nearby and unveiled her, from starry crown to cloud-treading toe. Her hands were clasped in prayer. Stooping, just as Athanasius had, Gentle put his hand over the statue's knitted fingers.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think they're beautiful. I was an artist once myself."

"You're strong. Maestro, I'll say that for you. I expected you to be brought to your knees by Our Lady."

"First I'm supposed to kneel for Hapexamendios; now for the Virgin."

"One in fealty, one in fear."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but my legs are my own. I'll kneel when I choose to. *If I choose to.*"

Athanasius looked puzzled. "I think you half believe that," he said.

"Damn right I do. I don't know what kind of conspiracy you think I'm guilty of, but I swear there's none."

"Maybe you're more His instrument than I thought," Athanasius said. "Maybe you're ignorant of His purpose."

"Oh, no," Gentle said. "I know what work I'm meant to do, and I see no reason to be ashamed of it. If I can reconcile the Fifth I will. I want the Imajica whole, and I'd have thought you would too. You can visit the Vatican. You'll find it's full of Madonnas."

As though inspired to fury by his words, the wind beat at the walls with fresh venom, a gust finding its way into the chamber, raising several of the lighter shrouds into the air and extinguishing one of the lamps.

"He won't save you," Athanasius said, clearly believing this wind had come to carry Gentle away. "Nor

will your ignorance, if that's what's kept you from harm."

He looked back towards the bodies he'd been studying as Floccus departed.

"Lady, forgive us," he said, "for doing this in your sight."

The words were a signal, it seemed. Four of the figures

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moved as he spoke, sitting up and pulling the shrouds from their heads. No Madonnas these. They were men and women of the Dearth, carrying blades like crescent moons. Athanasius looked back at Gentle.

"Will you accept the blessing of Our Lady before you die?" he said.

Somebody had already begun a prayer behind him, Gentle heard, and he glanced around to see that there were another three assassins there, two of them armed in the same lunatic fashion, the third—a girl no more than Huzzah's age, bare-breasted, doe-faced—darting between the rows uncovering statues as she went. No two were alike. There were Virgins of stone, Virgins of wood, Virgins of plaster. There were Virgins so crudely carved they were barely recognizable, and others so finely hewn and finished they looked ready to draw breath. Though minutes before, Gentle had laid his hand on one of this number without harm, the spectacle faintly sickened him. Did Athanasius know something about the condition of Maestros that he, Gentle, didn't? Might he somehow be subjugated by this image, the way in an earlier life he'd been enthralled by the sight of a woman naked, or promising nakedness?

Whatever mystery was here, he wasn't about to let Athanasius murder him while he puzzled it out. He drew breath and put his hand to his mouth as Athanasius drew a weapon of his own and started towards him at speed. The breath proved faster than the blade. Gentle unleashed the pneuma, not at Athanasius directly, but at the ground in front of him. The stones it struck flew into pieces, and Athanasius fell back as the fusillade hit him. He dropped his knife and clamped his hands to his face, yelling as much in rage as in pain. If there was a command in his clamor the assassins missed or ignored it. They kept a respectful distance from Gentle as he walked towards their wounded leader, through an air still gray with motes of pulverized stone. Athanasius was lying on his side, propped on his elbow. Gentle went down on his haunches beside the man and carefully drew Athanasius' hands from his face. There was a deep cut beneath his left eye, and another above his

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right. Both were bleeding copiously, as were a score of lighter cuts. None of them, however, would be calamitous for a man who wore wounds the way others wore jewelry. They would heal and add to his sum of scars.

"Call your assassins off, Athanasius," Gentle told him. "I didn't come here to hurt anybody, but if you press me too I'll kill every last one of them. Do you understand me?" He put his arm beneath the man and hauled him to his feet. "Now call them off."

Athanasius shrugged himself free of Gentle's hold and scanned his cohorts through a drizzle of blood.

"Let him pass," he said. "There'll be another time."

The assassins between Gentle and the door parted, though none of them lowered or sheathed their weapons. Gentle stood up and left Athanasius' side, passing only to offer one final observation.

"I wouldn't want to kill the man who married me to Pie'oh' pah," he said, "so before you come after me again, examine the evidence against me, whatever it is. And search your heart. I'm not your enemy. All I want to do is to heal Imajica. Isn't that what your Goddess wants too?"

If Athanasius had wanted to respond, he was too slow. Before he could open his mouth a cry rose from somewhere outside, and a moment later another, then another, then a dozen: all howls of pain and panic, twisted into eardrum-bruising screeches by the gusts that carried them. Gentle turned back to the door, but the wind had hold of the entire chamber, and even as he made to depart, one of the walls rose as if a titanic hand had seized hold of it and lifted it up into the air. The wind, bearing its freight of screams, rushed in, flinging the lamps over, their fuel spilled as they rolled before it. Caught by the very flames it had fed, the oil burst into bright yellow balls, by which light Gentle saw scenes of chaos on all sides. The assassins were being thrown over like the lamps, unable to withstand the power of the wind. One he saw impaled on her own blade. Another was carried into the oil and was instantly consumed by flame.

"What have you summoned?" Athanasius yelled.

"This isn't my doing," Gentle replied.

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Athanasius screeched some further accusation, but it was snatched from his lips as the rampage escalated. Another of the chamber's walls was summarily snatched away, its tatters rising into the air like a curtain to unveil a scene of catastrophe. The storm was at work throughout the length of the tents, disemboweling the glorious and scarlet beast Gentle had entered with such awe. Wall after wall was shredded or wrenched from the ground, the ropes and pegs that had held them lethal as they flew. And visible beyond the turmoil, its cause: the once featureless wall of the Erasure, featureless no longer. It roiled the way the sky Gentle had seen beneath the Pivot had roiled, a maelstrom whose place of origin seemed to be a hole torn in the Erasure's fabric. The sight gave substance to Athanasius' charges. Threatened by assassins and Madonnas, had Gentle unwittingly summoned some entity out of the First Dominion to protect him? If so, he had to find it and subdue it before he had more innocent lives to add to the roster of those who'd perished because of him.

With his eyes fixed on the tear, he vacated the chamber and headed towards the Erasure. The route between was the storm's highway. It carried the detritus of its deeds back and forth, returning to places it had already destroyed in its first assault to pick up the survivors and pitch them into the air like sacks of bloody down, tearing them open up above. There was a red rain in the gusts, which spattered Gentle as he went, yet the same authority that was condemning men and women all around left him untouched. It could not so much as knock him off his feet. The reason? His breath, which Pie had once called the source of all magic. Its cloak clung to him as it had before, apparently protecting him from the tumult, and, though it didn't impede his steps, it lent him a mass beyond that of flesh and bone.

With half the distance covered, he glanced back to see if there was any sign of life among the Madonnas. The place was easy to find, even amid this carnage; the fire burned with a wind-fed fervor, and through air thickened by blood and shards Gentle saw that several of the statues had been raised from their stony beds and now formed a circle in

which Athanasius and several of his followers were taking shelter. They'd offer little defense against this havoc, he thought, but several other survivors could be seen crawling towards the place, eyes fixed on the Holy Mothers.

Gentle turned his back on the sight and strode on towards the Erasure, catching sight -of another soul here weighty enough to resist the assault: a man in robes the color of the shredded tents, sitting cross-legged on the ground no more than twenty yards from the fury's source. His head was hooded, his face turned towards the maelstrom. Was this monkish creature the force he'd summoned? Gentle wondered. If not, how was this fellow surviving so close to the engine of destruction?

He started to yell to the man as he approached, by no means certain that his voice would carry in the din of wind and screams. But the monk heard. He looked round at Gentle, the hood half eclipsing his face. There was nothing untoward about his placid features. His face was in need of a shave; his nose, which had been broken at some time, in need of resetting; his eyes in need of nothing. They had all they wanted, it seemed, seeing the Maestro approach. A broad grin broke over the monk's face, and he instantly rose to his feet, bowing his head.

"Maestro," he said. "You do me honor." His voice wasn't raised, but it carried through the commotion. "Have you seen the mystif yet?"

"The mystif's gone," Gentle said. He didn't need to yell, he realized. His voice, like his limbs, carried an unnatural weight here.

"Yes, I saw it go," the monk replied, "But it's come back, Maestro. It broke through the Erasure, and the storm came after it."

"Where? Where?" Gentle said, turning full circle. "I don't see it!" He looked accusingly at the man. "It would have found me if it was here," he said.

"Trust me, it's trying," the man replied. He pulled back his hood. His gingery curls were thinning, but there was the vestige of a chorister's charm there. "It's very close, Maestro."

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Now it was he who stared into the storm: not to left and right, however, but up into the labyrinthine air. Gentle followed his gaze. There were swaths of tattered canvas on the wind high above them, rising and falling like vast wounded birds. There were pieces of furniture, shredded clothes, and fragments of flesh. And in among these clouds of dross, adarting form darker than either sky or storm, descending even as he set his eyes upon it. The monk drew closer to Gentle.

"That's the mystif," he said. "May I protect you, Maestro?"

"It's my friend," Gentle said. "I don't need protecting." "I think you do," the other replied, and raised his arms above his head, palms out as if to deflect the approaching spirit.

It slowed at the sight of this gesture, and Gentle had time to see the form above him plainly. It was indeed the mystif, or its remains. Either by stealth or sheer force of will it had breached the Erasure. But its escape had brought it no comfort whatsoever. The uredo burned more venomously than ever, almost entirely consuming the shadow body it had fixed upon and poisoned; and from the sufferer's mouth, a howl that could not have been more pained had its guts been drawn out of its belly in front of its eyes.

It had come to a complete halt now and hovered above the two men like a diver arrested in mid-descent, arms outstretched, head, or its traces, thrown back. "Pie?" Gentle said. "Have you done this?" The howl went on. If there were words in its anguish, Gentle couldn't make them out.

"I have to speak to it," Gentle said to his protector. "If you're causing it pain, for God's sake stop."

"It came out of the margin howling like this," the man said.

"At least drop your defenses. "It'll attack us. "I'll take that risk," he replied.

The man let his shunning hands fall to his side. The form above them twisted and turned but did not descend. An-

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other force had a claim upon it, Gentle realized. It was thrashing to resist a summons from the Erasure, which was calling it back into the place from which it had escaped.

"Can you hear me, Pie?" Gentle asked it.

The howl went on, unabated.

"If you can speak, do it!"

"It's already speaking," the monk said.

"I only hear howls," Gentle said.

"Past the howls," came the reply, "there are words."

Drops of fluid fell from the mystif's wounds as its struggles to resist the Erasure's power intensified. They stank of putrescence and burned Gentle's upturned face, but their stinging brought comprehension of the words encoded in Pie's screeches.

"Undone," the mystif was saying. "We're... undone...."

"Why did you do this?" Gentle asked.

"It wasn't... me. The storm was sent to claim me back."

"Out of the First?"

"It's... His will," Pie said. "His... will...."

Though the tortured form above him resembled the creature he'd loved and wed scarcely at all, Gentle could still hear fragments of Pie 'oh' pah in these replies and, hearing them, wanted to raise his own voice in anguish at the thought of Pie's pain. The mystif had gone into the First to end its suffering; but here it was, suffering still, and he was powerless to help it or heal it. All he could do by way of comfort was tell it that he understood, which he did. Its message was perfectly clear. In the trauma of their parting Pie had

sensed some equivocation in him. But there was none, and he said so.

"I know what I have to do," he told the sufferer. "Trust me, Pie. I understand. I'm the Reconciler. I'm not going to run from that."

At this, the mystif writhed like a fish on a hook, no longer able to keep itself from being hauled in by the fisherman in the First. It started to scrabble at the air, as if it might gain another moment in this Dominion by catching hold of amote. But the power that had sent such furies in pursuit of it had too strong a hold, and the spirit was drawn back to-

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wards the Erasure. Instinctively Gentle reached up towards it, hearing and ignoring a cry of alarm from the man at his side. The mystif reached for his hand, extending its shadowy substance to do so, and curling grotesquely long fingers around Gentle's. The contact sent such a convulsion through his system he would have been thrown to the ground but that his protector took hold of him. As it was his marrow seemed to burn in his bones, and he smelled the stench of rot off his skin, as though death were coming upon him inside and out. It was hard, in that agony, to hold on to the mystif, much less to the words it was trying to say. But he fought the urge to let go, struggling for the sense of the few syllables he was able to grasp. Three of them were his name.

"Sartori..."

"I'm here, Pie," Gentle said, thinking perhaps the thing was blinded now. "I'm still here."

But the mystif wasn't naming its Maestro. "The other," it said. "The *other*... " "What about him?"

"He knows," Pie murmured. "Find him, Gentle. He knows."

With this command, their fingers separated. The mystif reached to take hold of Gentle again, but with its frail hold lost it was prey to the Erasure and was instantly snatched towards the tear through which it had appeared. Gentle started after it, but his limbs had been more severely traumatized by the convulsion than he'd thought, and his legs simply folded up beneath him. He fell heavily, but raised his head in time to catch sight of the mystif disappearing into the void. Sprawled on the hard ground, he remembered his first pursuit of Pie, through the empty, icy streets of Manhattan. He'd fallen then, too, and looked up as he did now to see the riddle escaping him, unsolved. But it had turned that first time; turned and spoken to him across the river of Fifth Avenue, offering him the hope, however frail, of another meeting. Not so now. It went into the Erasure like smoke through a drafty door, its cry stopping dead.

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"Not again," Gentle murmured.

The monk was crouching at his side. "Can you stand," he asked, "or shall I get help?"

Gentle put his hands beneath him and pushed himself up into a kneeling position, making no reply to the question. With the mystif's disappearance, the malignant wind that had come after it, and brought such devastation, was dropping away, and as it did so the debris it had been keeping aloft descended in a grim hail. For a second time the monk raised his hands to ward off the descending force. Gentle was barely aware of what was happening. His eyes were on the Erasure, which was rapidly losing its roiling

motion. By the time the rain of canvas, stones, and bodies had stopped, every last trace of detail had gone from the divide, and it was once again an absence over which the eye slid, finding no purchase.

Gentle got to his feet and, turning his eyes from the nullity, scanned the desolation that lay in every other direction but one. The circle of Madonnas he'd glimpsed through the storm was still intact, and sheltering in its midst were half a hundred survivors, some of them on their knees sobbing or praying, many kissing the feet of the statues that had shielded them, still others gazing towards the Erasure from which the destruction that claimed all but these fifty, plus the Maestro and the monk, had come.

"Do you see Athanasius?" Gentle asked the man at his side.

"No, but he's alive somewhere," came the reply. "He's like you, Maestro; he's got too much purpose in him to die."

"I don't think any purpose would have saved me if you hadn't been here," Gentle remarked. "You've got real power in your bones."

"A little, maybe," the monk replied, with a modest smile. "I had a fine teacher."

"So did I," Gentle said softly. "But I lost it." Seeing the Maestro's eyes filling, the monk made to withdraw, but Gentle said, "Don't worry about the tears. I've been running from them too long. Let me ask you something. I'll quite understand if you say no."

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"What, Maestro?"

"When I leave here, I'm going back to the Fifth to prepare for a Reconciliation. Would you trust me enough to join the Synod; to represent the First?"

The monk's face broke into bliss, shedding years as he smiled, "It would be my honor, Maestro," he said.

"There's risk in it," Gentle warned.

"There always was. But I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

"How so?"

"You're my inspiration, Maestro," the man replied, inclining his head in deference. "Whatever you require of me, I'll perform as best I can."

"Stay here, then. Watch the Erasure and wait. I'll find you when the time comes." He spoke with more certainty than he felt, but then perhaps the illusion of competence was part of every Maestro's repertoire.

"I'll be waiting," the monk replied.

"What's your name?"

"When I joined the Dearthers they called me ChickaJackeen."

"Jackeen?"

"It means worthless fellow," the man replied.

"Then we've got much in common," Gentle said. He took the man's hand and shook it. "Remember me, Jack?een."

"You've never left my mind," the man replied.

There was some subtext here Gentle couldn't grasp, but this was no time to delve. He had two demanding and dangerous journeys ahead of him: the first to Yzordderrex, the second from that city back to the Retreat. Thanking Jack?een for his good offices, Gentle left him at the Erasure and picked his way back through the devastation towards the circle of Madonnas. Some of the survivors were leaving its shelter to begin a search of the site, presumably in the hope—vain, he suspected—of finding others alive. It was ascene of grief and bewilderment he'd witnessed too many times on his journey through the Dominions. Much as he would have liked to believe it was mere happenstance that

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these scenes of devastation coincided with his presence, he couldn't afford to indulge such self-delusion. He was assuredly wedded to the storm as he was to Pie. More so now, perhaps, with the mystif gone. "

Jackeen's observation that Athanasius was too purpose?ful a soul to have perished was confirmed as Gentle drew closer to the circle. The man was standing at the center of a knot of Dearthers, leading a prayer of thanks to the Holy Mother for their survival. As Gentle reached the perimeter, Athanasius raised his head. One eye was closed beneath a scab of blood and dirt, but there was enough hatred in the other to burn in a dozen eyes. Meeting its gaze, Gentle advanced no further, but the priest dropped the volume of his prayer to a whisper anyway, preventing the trespasser from hearing the terms of his devotion. Gentle's ears were not so dulled by the din he didn't catch a few of the phrases, however. Though the woman represented in so many modes around the circle was clearly the Virgin Mary, she apparently went by other names here; or else had sisters. He heard her called Uma Umagammagi, Mother Imajica; and heard too the name Huzzah had first whispered to him in her cell beneath the *maison de sante*: Tishalull6. There was a third, though it took Gentle a little time to be certain he'd understood the naming aright, and that was Jokalaylau. Athanasius prayed that she'd keep a place for them at her side in the snows of paradise, which made Gentle wonder rather sourly if the man had ever trodden those wastes, that he could think them a heavenly place.

Though the names were strange, the inspiring spirit was not. Athanasius and his forlorn congregation were praying to the same loving Goddess at whose shrines in the Fifth countless candles were lit every day. Even Gentle at his most pagan had conceded the presence of that woman in his life and worshiped her the only way he'd known how: with the seduction and temporary possession of her sex. Had he known a mother or a loving sister he might have learned a better devotion than lust, but he hoped and believed the Holy Woman would forgive him his trespasses, even if Athanasius would not. The thought comforted him. He

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would need all the protection he could assemble in the battle that lay ahead, and it was no little solace to think that the Mother Imajica had her worshiping places in the Fifth, where that battle would be fought.

With the ad hoc service over, Athanasius let his congregation go about the business of searching the

wreckage. For his part, he stayed in the middle of the circle, where a few survivors who'd made it that far, but perished, lay sprawled.

"Come here, Maestro," Athanasius said. "There's something you should see."

Gentle stepped into the circle, expecting Athanasius to show him the corpse of a child or some fragile beauty, broken. But the face at his feet was male, and far from innocent.

"You knew him, I think."

"Yes. His name was Estabrook."

Charlie's eyes were closed, his mouth too: sealed up in the moment of his passing. There was very little sign of physical damage. Perhaps his heart had simply given out in the excitement.

"Nikaetomaas said you brought him here because you thought he was me."

"We thought he was a Messiah," Athanasius said. "When we realized he wasn't we kept looking, expecting a miracle. Instead—"

"You got me. For what it's worth, you were right. I *did* bring all this destruction with me. I don't quite know why, and I don't expect you to forgive me for it, but I want you to understand that I take no pleasure in it. All I want to do is make good the damage I've done."

"And how will you do that, Maestro?" Athanasius said. His one good eye brimmed with tears as he surveyed the bodies. "How will you make this good? Can you resurrect them with what's between your legs? Is that the trick of it? Can you fuck them back into life?"

Gentle made a guttural sound of disgust.

"Well, that's what you Maestros think, isn't it? You don't want to suffer, you just want the glory. You lay your rod on the land, and the land bears fruit. That's what you

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think. But it doesn't work that way. It's your *blood* the land wants; it's your sacrifice. And as long as you deny that, others are going to die in your place. Believe me, I'd cut my throat now if I thought I could raise these people, but I've been played a wretched trick. I've the will to do it, but my blood's not worth a damn. Yours is.' I don't know why. I wish it weren't. But it is."

"Would Uma Umagammagi like to see me bleed?" Gentle said. "Or Tishalulte? Or Jokalaylau? Is that what your loving mothers want from this child?"

"You don't belong to them. I don't know who you belong to, but you didn't come from their sweet bodies."

"I must have come from somewhere," Gentle said, voicing that thought for the first time in his life. "I've got a purpose in me, and I think God put it there."

"Don't look too far, Maestro. Your ignorance may be the only defense the rest of us have got against

you. Give up your ambition now, before you find out what you're really capable of."

"I can't."

"Oh, but it's easy," Athanasius said. "Kill yourself, Maestro. Let the land have your blood. That's the greatest service you could do the Dominions now."

There was the bitterest echo, in these words, of a letter he'd read months ago, in another kind of wilderness.

Do this for the women of the world, Vanessa had written. Slit your lying throat.

Had he really traveled the Dominions simply to have the advice he'd been given by a woman whom he'd cheated in love returned to him? After all this striving for comprehension, was he finally as injurious and fraudulent a Maestro as he was a lover?

Athanasius read the accuracy of this last dart off his target's face and with a feral grin hammered it home.

"Do it soon, Maestro," he said. "There are enough orphans in the Dominions already, without you indulging your ambitions for another day."

Gentle let these cruelties go. "You married me to the

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love of my life, Athanasius," he said. "I won't ever forget that kindness."

"Poor Pie 'oh' pah," the other man replied, grinding the point home. "Another of your victims. What a *poison* there must be in you, Maestro."

Gentle turned and left the circle without responding, with Athanasius repeating his earlier advice to usher him on his way.

"Kill yourself soon, Maestro," he said. "For you, for Pie, for all of us. Kill yourself soon."

2

It took Gentle a quarter of an hour to make his way through the ravagement to open ground, hoping as he went that he'd find some vehicle—Floccus', perhaps—that he could commandeer for the return journey to Yzordderrex. If he found nothing, it would be a long trek on foot, but that would have to be the way of it. What little illumination the fires behind him proffered soon dwindled, and he was obliged to search by starlight, which would most probably have failed to show him the vehicle had his path not been redirected by the squeals of Floccus Dado's porcine pet Sighshy^ who, along with her litter, was still inside. The car had been thrown over in the storm, and so he went to it simply to let the animals out, planning to go on to find another. But as he struggled with the handle a human face appeared at the steamed-up window. Floccus was inside and greeted Gentle's appearance with a clamor of relief almost as high-pitched as Sighshy's. Gentle clambered up onto the side of the car and after much swearing and sweating wrenched the door open with brute force.

"Oh, you're a sight to behold, Maestro," Floccus said. "I thought I was going to suffocate in there."

The stench was piercing, and it came with Floccus when he clambered out. His clothes were caked in the litter's excrement, and Mama's too.

"How the hell did you get in there?" Gentle asked him.

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Floccus wiped a turd trail off his spectacles and blinked at his savior through them.

"When Athanasius told me to summon you, I thought, Something's wrong here, Dado. You'd better go while you can. I'd just got into the car when the storm started, and it was simply turned over, with all of us inside. The windows are unbreakable, and the locks were jammed. I couldn't get out."

"You were lucky to be in there."

"So I see," Floccus observed, surveying the distant vista of destruction. "What happened out here?"

"Something came out of the First, in pursuit of Pie 'oh'pah."

"The Unbeheld did this?"

"So it would seem."

"Unkind," Floccus said softly, which was surely the understatement of the night.

Floccus lifted Sighshy and her litter—two of which had perished when their mother fell on them—out of the vehicle; then he and Gentle set to the task of putting it back on four wheels. It took some doing, but Floccus made up in strength what he lacked in height, and between the two of them the job was done.

Gentle had made plain his intention to return to Yzordderrex but wasn't certain of Floccus' intentions until the engine was running. Then he said, "Are you coming with me?"

"I should stay," Floccus replied. There was a fretful pause. "But I've never been much good with death."

"You said the same thing about sex."

"It's true."

"That doesn't leave much, does it?"

"Would you prefer to go without me, Maestro?"

"Not at all. If you want to come, come. But let's get going. I want to be in Yzordderrex by dawn."

"Why, what happens at dawn?" Floccus said, a superstitious flutter in his voice.

"It's a new day."

"Should we be grateful for that?" the other man in-

quired, as though he sniffed some profound wisdom in the Maestro's reply but couldn't quite grasp it.

"Indeed we should, Floccus, indeed we should. For the day, and for the chance."

"What...er...what *chance* would that be exactly?"

"The chance to change the world."

"Ah," said Floccus. "Of course. To change the world. I'll make that my prayer from now on."

"We'll compose it together, Floccus. We've got to invent everything from now on: who we are, what we believe. There's been too many old roads taken. Too many old dramas repeated. We've got to find a new way by tomorrow."

"A new way."

"That's right. We'll make that our ambition, agreed? To be new men by the time the comet comes up."

Floccus' doubt was visible, even by starlight. "That doesn't give us very long," he observed.

True enough, Gentle thought. In the Fifth, midsummer could not be very far off, and though he didn't yet comprehend the reasons, he knew the Reconciliation could only be performed on that day. There was a fine irony. Having frittered away lifetimes in pursuit of sensation, the span he had left in which to make good the error of that waste could be measured in terms of hours.

"There'll be time," he said, hoping to answer Floccus' doubts, and subdue his own, but knowing in his heart of hearts that he was doing neither.

6

I

Jude was stirred from the torpor Quaisoir's narcotic bed had induced in her not by sound—she'd long since become accustomed to the anarchy that had raged unabated throughout the night—but by a sense of unease too vague to be identified and too insistent to be ignored. Something of consequence had happened in the Dominion, and though her wits were dulled by indulgence, she woke too agitated to return to the comfort of a scented pillow. Head throbbing, she heaved herself up out of the bed and went in search of her sister. Concupiscentia was at the door, with a sly smile on her face. Jude half remembered the creature slipping into one of her drugged dreams, but the details were hazy, and the foreboding she'd woken with was more important now than remembering the fantasies that had gone before. She found Quaisoir in a darkened room, sitting beside the window.

"Did something wake you, sister?" Quaisoir asked her.

"I don't quite know what, but yes. Do you know what it was?"

"Something in the desert," Quaisoir replied, turning her head towards the window, though she lacked the

eyes to see what lay outside. "Something momentous."

"Is there any way of finding out what?"

Quaisoir took a deep breath. "No easy way."

"But there is one?"

"Yes, there's a place beneath the Pivot Tower..."

Concupiscentia had followed Judith into the room, but now, at the mention of this place, she made to withdraw. She was neither quiet nor fast enough, however. Quaisoir summoned her back.

"Don't be afraid," she told the creature. "We don't need you with us once we're inside. But fetch a lamp, will you? And something to eat and drink. We may be there awhile."

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It was half a day and more since Jude and Quaisoir had taken refuge in the suite of chambers, and in that time any last occupants of the palace had made their escape, doubtless fearing the revolutionary zeal that would want the fortress cleansed of the Autarch's excesses down to the last bureaucrat. Those bureaucrats had fled, but the zealots hadn't appeared in their place. Though Jude had heard commotion in the courtyards as she'd dozed, it had never come close. Either the fury that had moved the tide was exhausted, and the insurgents were resting before they began their assault on the palace, or else their fervor had lost its singular purpose altogether, and the commotion she'd heard was factions battling with each other for the right to plunder, which conflicts had destroyed them all, left, right, and center. Whatever, the consequence was the same: a palace built to house many thousands of souls—servants, soldiers, pen pushers, cooks, stewards, messengers, torturers, and majordomos—was deserted, and they went through it, Jude led by Concupiscentia's lamp, Quaisoir led by Jude, like three tiny specks of life lost in a vast and dark machine. The only sounds were their footsteps, and those that said machine made as it ran down: hot-water pipes ticking as the furnaces that fed them guttered out; shutters beating themselves to splinters in empty rooms; guard dogs barking on gnawed leashes, fearful their masters would not come again. Nor would they. The furnaces would cool, the shutters break, and the dogs, trained to bring death, would have it come to them in their turn. The age of the Autarch Sartori was over, and no new age had yet begun.

As they walked Jude asked for an explanation of the place to which they were going, and by way of reply Quaisoir offered first a history of the Pivot. Of all the Autarch's devices to subdue and rule the Reconciled Dominions, she said—subverting the religions and governments of his enemies; setting nation against nation—none would have kept him in power for more than a decade had he not possessed the genius to steal and to set at the center of his empire the greatest symbol of power in the Imajica. The Pivot was

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Hapexamendios' marker, and the fact that the Unbeheld had allowed the architect of Yzordderrex to

even touch, much less move, his pylon was for many proof that however much they might despise the Autarch, he was touched by divinity and could never be toppled, What powers it had conferred on its possessor even she didn't know.

"Sometimes," she said, "when he was high on kreau-chee, he'd talk about the Pivot as though he was married to it, and he was the wife. Even when we made love he'd talk that way. He'd say it was in him the way he was in me. He'd always deny it afterward, of course, but it was in his mind always. It's in every man's mind."

Jude doubted this, and said so.

"But they so want to be *possessed*," Quaisoir replied. "They want some Holy Spirit inside them. You listen to their prayers."

"That's not something I hear very often."

"You will when the smoke clears," Quaisoir replied. "They'll be afraid, once they realize the Autarch's gone. They may have hated him, but they'll hate his absence more."

"If they're afraid they'll be dangerous," Jude said, realizing as she spoke how well these sentiments might have come from Clara Leash's mouth. "They won't be devout."

Concupiscentia halted, before Quaisoir could take up her account afresh, and began to murmur a little prayer of her own.

"Are we here?" Quaisoir asked.

The creature broke the rhythm of her entreaty to tell her mistress that they were. There was nothing remarkable about the door in front of them, or the staircases that wound out of sight to either side of it. All were monumental, and therefore commonplace. They'd passed through dozens of portals like this as they'd made their way through the place's cooling belly. But Concupiscentia was plainly in terror of it, or rather of what lay on the other side.

"Are we near the Pivot?" Jude said.

"The tower's directly above us," Quaisoir replied.

"That's not where we're going?"

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"No. The Pivot would probably kill us both. But there's a chamber below the tower, where the messages the Pivot collects drain away. I've spied there often, though he never knew it."

Jude let go of Quaisoir's arm and went to the door, keeping to herself the irritation she felt at being denied the tower itself. She wanted to see this power, which had reputedly been shaped and planted by God Himself. Quaisoir had talked of it as lethal, and perhaps it was, but how was anyone to know until they'd tested themselves against it? Perhaps its reputation was the Autarch's invention, his way of keeping its gifts for himself. Under its aegis, he'd prospered, no doubt of that. What might others do, if they had its blessing conferred upon them? Turn night to day?

She turned the handle and pushed open the door. Sour and chilly air issued from the darkened space beyond. Jude summoned Concupiscentia to her side, took the lamp from the creature, and held it high. Ahead lay a small inclined corridor, its walls almost burnished.

"Do I wait here, lady?" Concupiscentia asked.

"Give me whatever you brought to eat," Quaisoir replied, "and stay outside the door. If you hear or see anybody, I want you to come and find us. I know you don't like to go in there, but you must be brave. Understand me, dear-ling?"

"I understand, lady," Concupiscentia replied, handing to her mistress the bundle and the bottle she'd carried with her.

Thus laden, Quaisoir took Jude's arm and they stepped into the passage. One part of the fortress's machine was still operational, it seemed, because as soon as they closed the door after them a circuit, broken as long as the door stood wide, was completed, and the air began to vibrate against their skin: vibrate and whisper.

"Here they are," Quaisoir said. "The intimations."

That was too civilized a word for this sound, Jude thought. The passageway was filled with a quiet commotion, like snatches from a thousand radio stations, all incomprehensible, coming and going as the dial was flipped, and

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flipped again. Jude raised the lamp to see how much farther they had to travel. The passageway ended ten yards ahead, but with every yard they covered the din increased—not in volume but in complexity—as new stations were added to the number the walls were already tuned into. None of it was music. There were multitudes of voices raised as a single sound, and there were solitary howls; there were sobs, and shouts, and words spoken like a recitation.

"What is this noise?" Jude asked.

"The Pivot hears every piece of magic in the Dominions. Every invocation, every confession, every dying oath. This is the Unbeheld's way of knowing what Gods are being worshiped besides Him. And what Goddesses, too."

"He spies on deathbeds?" Jude said, more than faintly disgusted by the thought.

"On every place where a mortal thing speaks to the divine, whether the divinity exists or not, whether the prayer's answered or not, He's there."

"Here too?" Jude said.

"Not unless you start praying," Quaisoir said.

"I won't."

They were at the end of the passage, and the air was busier than ever; colder, too. The lamp's light

illuminated a room shaped like a colander, maybe twenty feet across, its curved walls as polished as those of the passage. In the floor was a grille, like a gutter beneath a butcher's table, through which the detritus of prayers, ripped from the hearts of those in grief or washed up in tears of joy, ran off into the mountain upon which Yzordderex was built. It was difficult for Jude to grasp the notion of prayer as a solid thing—a kind of matter to be gathered, analyzed, and sluiced away—but she knew her incomprehension was a consequence of living in a world out of love with transformation. There was nothing so solid that it couldn't be abstracted, nothing so ethereal that it couldn't find a place in the material world. Prayer might be substance after a time, and thought (which she'd believed skull-bound until the dream of the blue stone) fly like a bright-eyed bird, seeing the world remote from its sender; a flea might unravel

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flesh if wise to its code; and flesh in its turn move between worlds as a picture drawn in the mind of passage. All these mysteries were, she knew, part of a single system if she could only grasp it: one form becoming another, and another, and another, in a glorious tapestry of transformations, the sum of which was Being itself.

It was no accident that she embraced that possibility here. Though the sounds that filled the room were incomprehensible as yet, their purpose was known to her, and it raised the ambition of her thoughts. She let go of Quaisoir's arm and walked into the middle of the room, setting the lamp down beside the grille in the floor. They'd come here for a specific reason, and she knew she had to hold fast to that; otherwise her thoughts would be carried away on the swell of sound.

"How do we make sense of it?" she said to Quaisoir.

"It takes time," her sister replied. "Even for me. But I marked the compass points on the walls. Do you see?"

She did. Crude marks, scratched in the surface sheen.

"The Erasure is north-northwest of here. We can narrow the possibilities a little by turning in that direction." She extended her arms, like a haunting spirit. "Will you lead me to the middle?" she said.

Jude obliged, and they both turned in the direction of the Erasure. As far as Jude was concerned, doing so did little good. The din continued in all its complexity. But Quaisoir dropped her hands and listened intently, moving her head slightly from side to side as she did so. Several minutes passed, Jude keeping her silence for fear an inquiry would break her sister's concentration, and was rewarded for her diligence, finally, with some murmured words.

"They're praying to the Madonna," Quaisoir said.

"Who are?"

"Dearthers. Out at the Erasure. They're giving thanks for their deliverance and asking for the souls of the dead to be received into paradise."

She fell silent again for a time, and now, with some clues as to what she had to listen for, Jude attempted to sort through the intimations that filled her head. But although

she was refining her focus, and could now snatch words and phrases out of the confusion, she couldn't hold that focus long enough to make any sense of what she heard. After a time Quaisoir's body relaxed, and she shrugged.

"There's just glimpses now," she said. "I think they're finding bodies. I hear little sobs of prayers and little oaths."

"Do you know what happened?"

"This was some time ago," Quaisoir said. "The Pivot's had these prayers for several hours. But it was something calamitous, that's certain," she said. "I think there are a lot of casualties."

"It's as if what happened in, Yzordderrex is spreading," Jude said.

"Maybe it is," Quaisoir said. "Do you want to sit down and eat?"

"In here?"

"Why not? I find it very soothing." Reaching for Jude to help her, Quaisoir squatted down. "You get used to it after a time. Maybe a little addicted. Speaking of which . . . where's the food?" Jude put the bundle into Quaisoir's outstretched hands. "I hope the child packed kreauchee."

Her fingers were strong and, having scoured the surface of the bundle, dug deep, passing the contents over to Jude one by one. There was fruit, there were three loaves of black bread, there was some meat, and—the finding enough to bring a gleeful yelp from Quaisoir—a small parcel which she did not pass over to Jude but put to her nose.

"Bright thing," Quaisoir said. "She knows what I need."

"Is it some kind of drug?" Jude said, laying down the food. "I don't want you taking it. I need you here, not drifting off."

"Are you trying to forbid me my pleasure, after the way you dreamed on my pillows?" Quaisoir said. "Oh, yes, I heard your gasping and your groaning. Who were you imagining?"

"That's my business."

"And this is mine," Quaisoir replied, discarding the tissue in which Concupiscentia had fastidiously wrapped the kreauchee. It looked appetizing, like a cube of fudge.

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"When you've got no addiction of your own, sister, then you can moralize," Quaisoir said. "I won't listen, but you can moralize."

With that, she put the whole of the kreauchee into her mouth, chewing on it contentedly. Jude, meanwhile, sought more conventional sustenance, choosing among the various fruits one that resembled a diminutive pineapple and peeling it to discover it was just that, its juice tart but its meat tasty. That eaten, she went on to the bread and slivers of meat, her hunger so stimulated by the first few bites that she steadily devoured the lot, washing it down with bitter water from the bottle. The fall of prayers that had

seemed so insistent when she'd first entered the chamber could not compete with the more immediate sensations of fruit, bread, meat, and water; the din became a background burble which she scarcely thought about until she'd finished her meal. By that time, the kreauchee was clearly working in Quaisoir's system. She was swaying back and forth as though in the arms of some invisible tide.

"Can you hear me?" Jude asked her.

She took awhile to reply. "Why don't you join me?" she said. "Kiss me, and we can share the kreauchee. Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"I don't want to kiss you."

"Why not? Do you hate yourself too much to make love?" She smiled to herself, amused by the perverse logic of this. "Have you ever made love to a woman?"

"Not that I remember."

"I have. At the Bastion. It was better than being with a man."

She reached out towards Jude and found her hand with the accuracy of one sighted.

"You're cold," she said.

"No, you're hot," Jude replied, moving to break the contact.

"You know what air makes this place so cold, sister?" Quaisoir said. "It's the pit beneath the city, where the fake Redeemer went."

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Jude looked down at the grille and shuddered. The dead were down there somewhere.

"You're cold like the dead are cold," Quaisoir went on. "Icy heart." All this she said in a singsong voice, to the rhythm of her rocking. "Poor sister. To be dead already."

"I don't want to hear any more of this," Jude said. She'd preserved her equanimity so far, but Quaisoir's fugue talk was beginning to irritate her. "If you don't stop," she said quietly, "I'm going to leave you here."

"Don't do that," Quaisoir replied. "I want you to stay and make love to me."

"I've told you—"

"Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"You're talking in circles."

"That's the way the world was made," she said. "Joined together, round and round." She put her hand to her mouth, as if to cover it, then smiled, with almost fiendish glee. "There's no way in and there's no way out. That's what the Goddess says. When we make love, we go round and round—"

She searched for Jude a second time, with the same unerring ease, and a second time Jude withdrew her hand, realizing as she did so that this repetition was part of her sister's egocentric game. A sealed system of mirrored flesh, moving round and round. Was that truly how the world was made? If so, it sounded like a trap, and she wanted her mind out of it, there and then.

"I can't stay in here," she said to Quaisoir.

"You'll come back?" her sister replied.

"Yes, in a while."

The answer was more repetition. "You'll come back."

This time Jude didn't bother replying, but crossed to the passageway and climbed back up to the door. Concupiscentia was still waiting on the other side, asleep now, her form delineated by the first signs of dawn through the window on the sill of which she rested. The fact that day was breaking surprised Jude; she'd assumed that there were several hours yet before the comet reared its burning head. She was obviously more disoriented than she'd thought, the

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time she'd spent in the room with Quaisoir—listening to the prayers, eating, and arguing—not minutes but hours. She went to the window and looked down at the dim courtyards. Birds stirred on a ledge somewhere below her and rose suddenly, heading into the brightening sky, taking her eye with them, up towards the tower. Quaisoir had been unequivocal about the dangers of venturing there. But for all her talk of love between women, wasn't she still in thrall to the mythologies of the man who'd made her Queen of Yzordderex, and therefore bound to believe that the places he kept her from would do her harm? There was no better time to challenge that mythology than now, Jude thought, with a new day beginning, and the power that had uprooted the Pivot and raised such walls around it gone.

She went to the stairs and started to climb. After a few steps their curve took her into utter darkness, and she was obliged to ascend as blind as the sister she'd left below, her palm flat against the cold wall. But after maybe thirty stairs her outstretched arm encountered a door, so heavy she first assumed it to be locked. It required all her strength to open, but her effort was well rewarded. On the other side was a passageway lighter than the staircase she'd climbed, though still gloomy enough to limit her sight to less than ten yards. Hugging the wall, she advanced with great caution, her route bringing her to the corner of a corridor, the door that had once sealed it off from the chamber at its end blown from its hinges and lying, fractured and twisted, on the tiled floor beyond. She paused here, in order to listen for any sign of the wrecker's presence. There was none, so she moved on past the place, her gaze drawn to a flight of stairs that led up to her left. Forsaking the passageway, she began a second ascent, this one also leading into darkness, until she rounded a corner and a sliver of light descended to meet her. Its source was the door at the summit of the stairs, which stood slightly ajar.

Again, she halted a moment. Though there was no overt indication of power here—the atmosphere was almost tranquil—she knew that the force she'd come to confront was undoubtedly waiting in its silo at the top of the stairs, and

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more than likely sentient. She didn't discount the possibility that this hush was contrived to soothe her,

and the light sent to coax. But if it wanted her up there, it must have a reason. And if it didn't—if it was as lifeless as the stone underfoot—she had nothing to lose.

"Let's see what you're made of," she said aloud, the challenge delivered at least as much to herself as the Un-beheld's Pivot. And so saying, she went to the door.

2

Though there were undoubtedly more direct routes to the Pivot Tower than the one he'd taken with Nikaetomaas, Gentle decided to go the way he half remembered rather than attempt a shortcut and find himself lost in the labyrinth. He parted company with Floccus Dado, Sighshy, and litter at the Gate of Saints and began his climb through the palace, checking on his position relative to the Pivot Tower from every window.

Dawn was in the offing. Birds rose singing from their nests beneath the colonnades and swooped over the court yards, indifferent to the bitter smoke that passed for mist this morning. Another day was imminent, and his system was badly in need of sleep. He'd dozed a little on the journey from the Erasure, but the effect had been cosmetic. There was a fatigue in his marrow which would bring him to his knees very soon now, and the knowledge of that made him eager to complete the day's business as quickly as possible. He'd come back here for two reasons. First, to finish the task Pie's appearance and wounding had diverted him from: the pursuit and execution of Sartori. Second, whether he found his doppelganger here or not, to make his way back to the Fifth, where Sartori had talked of founding his New Yzordderrex. It wouldn't be difficult to get home, he knew now that he was alive to his capacities as a Maestro. Even without the mystif to point the way, he'd be able to dig from memory the means to pass between Dominions.

But first, Sartori. Though two days had passed since he'd let the Autarch slip, he nursed the hope that his other would

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still be haunting his palace. After all, removal from this self-made womb, where his smallest word had been law and his tiniest deed worshipful, would be painful. He'd linger awhile, surely. And if he was going to linger anywhere, it would be close to the object of power that had made him the undisputed master of the Reconciled Dominions: the Pivot.

He was just beginning to curse himself for losing his way when he came upon the spot where Pie had fallen. He recognized it instantly, as he did the distant door that led into the tower. He allowed himself a moment of meditation at the spot where he'd cradled Pie, but it wasn't their fond exchanges here that filled his head, it was the mystif's last words, uttered in anguish as the force behind the Erasure reclaimed it.

Sartori, Pie had said. *Find him... he knows...*

Whatever knowledge Sartori possessed—and Gentle guessed it would concern plots laid against the Reconciliation—he, Gentle, was ready to do whatever was required in order to squeeze this information from his other before he delivered the coup de grace. There were no moral niceties here. If he had to break every bone in Sartori's body, it would be a little hurt set beside the crimes he'd committed as Autarch, and Gentle would perform such duties gladly.

Thought of torture, and the pleasure he'd take in it, had tempted him from his meditation entirely, and he gave upon his pursuit of equilibrium. Venom swilling in his belly, he headed down the corridor, through the

door, and into the tower. Though the comet was climbing towards midmorning, very little of its light gained access to the tower, but those few beams that did creep in showed him empty passages in all directions. He still advanced with caution; this was a maze of chambers, any one of which might conceal his enemy. Fatigue left him less light-footed than he'd have liked, but he reached the stairs that curled up towards the silo itself without his stumbles attracting any attention, and began to climb. The door at the top had been opened, he remembered, with the key of Sartori's thumb, and he'd have to repeat the feat himself in order to enter.

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That was no great challenge. They had the same thumbs, to the tiniest whorl.

As it was, he needed no feat. The door was open wide, and somebody was moving about inside. Gentle halted ten steps from the threshold and drew breath. He'd need to incapacitate his other quickly if he was to prevent retaliation: a pneuma to take off his right hand, another for his left. Breath readied, he climbed swiftly to the top of the stairs and stepped into the tower.

His enemy was standing beneath the Pivot, arms raised, reaching for the stone. He was all in shadow, but Gentle caught the motion of his head as he turned towards the door, and before the other could lower his arms in defense, Gentle had his fist to his mouth, the breath rising in his throat. As it filled his palm his enemy spoke, but the voice when it came was not his own, as he'd expected, but that of a woman. Realizing his error, he clamped his fist around the pneuma to quench it, but the power he'd unleashed wasn't about to be cheated of its quarry. It broke from between his fingers, its force fragmented but no less eager for that. The pieces flew off around the silo, some darting up the sides of the Pivot, others entering its shadow and extinguished there. The woman cried out in alarm and retreated from her attacker, backing against the opposite wall. There the light found her perfection. It was Judith; or at least it seemed to be. He'd seen this face in Yzordderrex once already and been mistaken.

"Gentle?" she said. "Is that you?"

It sounded like her too. But then hadn't that been his promise to Roxborough, that he'd fashion a copy indistinguishable from the original?

"It's me," she said. "It's Jude."

Now he began to believe it was, for there was more proof in that last syllable than sight could ever supply. Nobody in her circle of admirers, besides Gentle, had ever called her Jude. Judy, sometimes; Juju, even; but never Jude. That was his diminution, and to his certain knowledge she'd never suffered another to use it.

He repeated it now, his hand dropping from his mouth as

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he spoke, and seeing the smile spread across his face she ventured back towards him, returning into the shadow of the Pivot as he came to meet her. The move saved her life. Seconds after she left the wall a slab of rock, blasted from the heights of the silo by the pneuma, fell on the spot where she'd stood. It initiated a hard, lethal rain, shards of stone falling on all sides. There was safety in the shelter of the Pivot, however, and there they met and kissed and embraced as though they'd been parted a lifetime, not weeks, which in a sense was true. The din of falling rock was muted in the shadow, though its thunder was

only yards from where they stood. When she cupped his face in her hands and spoke, her whispers were quite audible; as were his.

"I've missed you," she said. There was a welcome warmth in her voice, after the days of anguish and accusation he'd heard. "I even dreamed about you...."

"Tell me," he murmured, his lips close to hers.

"Later, maybe," she said, kissing him again. "I've so much to tell you,"

"Likewise," Gentle said.

"We should find ourselves somewhere safer than this," she said.

"We're out of harm's way here," Gentle said.

"Yes, but for how long?"

The scale of the demolition was increasing, its violence out of all proportion to the force Gentle had unleashed, although the Pivot had taken the pneuma's power and magnified it. Perhaps it knew—how could it not?—that the man it had been in thrall to had gone and was now about the business of shrugging off the prison Sartori had raised around it. Judging by the size of the slabs falling all around, the process would not take long. They were monumental, their impact sufficient to open cracks in the floor of the tower, the sight of which brought a cry of alarm from Jude.

"Oh, God, Quaisoir!" she said.

"What about her?"

"She's down there!" Jude said, staring at the gaping ground. "There's a chamber below this! She's in it!"

"She'll be out of there by now."

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"No, she's high on kreauchee! We have to get down there!"

She left Gentle's side and crossed to the edge of their shelter, but before she could make a dash for the open door a new fall of rubble and dust obliterated the way ahead. It wasn't simply blocks of the tower that were falling now, Gentle saw. There were vast shards of the Pivot itself in this hail. What was it doing? Destroying itself, or shedding skin to uncover its core? Whichever, their place in the shadow was more precarious by the second. The cracks underfoot were already a foot wide and widening, the hovering monolith above them shuddering as if it was about to give up the effort of suspension and drop. They had no choice but to brave the rockfall.

He went to join Jude, searching his wits for a means to survival and picturing Chicka Jackeen at the Erasure, his hands high to ward off the detritus dropped by the storm. Could he do the same? Not giving himself pause to doubt, he lifted his hands above his head as he'd seen the monk do, palms up, and stepped out of the Pivot's shadow. One heavenward glance confirmed both the Pivot's shedding and the scale of his jeopardy. Though the dust was thick, he could see that the monolith was sloughing off scales

of stone, the pieces large enough to smash them both to pulp. But his defense held. The slabs shattered two or three feet above his naked head, their smithereens dropping like a fleeting vault around him. He felt the impact nevertheless, as a succession of jolts through his wrists, arms, and shoulders, and knew he lacked the strength to preserve the feat for more than a few seconds. Jude had already grasped the method in his madness, however, and stepped from the shadow to join him beneath this flimsy shield. There were perhaps ten paces between where they stood and the safety of the door.

"Guide me," he told her, unwilling to take his eyes off the rain for fear his concentration slip and the feat lose its potency.

Jude slipped her arm around his waist and navigated for them both, telling him where to step to find clear ground and warning him when the path was so heavily strewn they

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were obliged to stumble over stone. It was a tortuous business, and Gentle's upturned hands were steadily beat down until they were barely above his head, but the feat held to the door, and they slid through it together, with the Pivot and its prison throwing down such a hail of debris that neither was now visible.

Then Jude was off at speed, down the murky stairs. The walls were shaking, and laced with cracks as the demolition above took its toll below, but they negotiated both the trembling passageway and the second flight of stairs down to the lower level unharmed. Gentle was startled at the sight and sound of Concupiscentia, who was screeching in the passageway like a terrified ape, unwilling to go in search of her mistress, Jude had no such qualms. She'd already thrown open the door and was heading down an incline into a lamp-lit chamber beyond, calling Quaisoir's name to stir her from her stupor. Gentle followed, but was slowed by the cacophony that greeted him, a mingling of manic whispers and the din of capitulation from above. By the time he reached the room itself, Jude had bullied her sister to her feet. There were substantial cracks in the ceiling and a constant drizzle of dust, but Quaisoir seemed indifferent to the hazard.

"I said you'd come back," she said. "Didn't I? Didn't I say you'd come back? Do you want to kiss me? Please kiss me, sister."

"What's she talking about?" Gentle asked.

The sound of his voice brought a cry from the woman. She flung herself out of Jude's arms.

"What have you done?" she yelled. "Why did you bring him here?"

"He's come to help us," Jude replied.

Quaisoir spat in Gentle's direction. "Leave me alone!" she screeched. "Haven't you done enough? Now you want to take my sister from me! You bastard! I won't let you! We'll die before you touch her!" She reached for Jude, sobbing in panic. "*Sister! Sister!*"

"Don't be frightened," Jude said. "He's a friend." She

looked at Gentle. "Reassure her," she begged him. "Tell her who you are, so we can get out of here."

"I'm afraid she already knows," Gentle replied.

Jude was mouthing the word *what?* when Quaisoir's panic boiled up again.

"Sartori!" she screeched, her denunciation echoing around the room. "He's Sartori, sister! Sartori!"

Gentle raised his hands in mock surrender, backing away from the woman. "I'm not going to touch you," he said. "Tell her, Jude. I don't want to hurt her!"

But Quaisoir was in the throes of another outburst. "Stay with me, sister," she said, grabbing hold of Jude. "He can't kill us both!"

"You can't stay in here," Jude said.

"I'm not going out!" Quaisoir said. "He's got soldiers out there! Rosengarten! That's who he's got! And his torturers!"

"It's safer out there than it is in here," Jude said, casting her eyes up at the roof. Several carbuncles had appeared in it, oozing debris. "We have to be quick!"

Still she refused, putting her hand up to Jude's face and stroking her cheek with her clammy palm: short, nervous strokes.

"We'll stay here together," she said. "Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"We can't," Jude told her, speaking as calmly as circumstance allowed. "I don't want to be buried alive, and neither do you."

"If we die, we die," said Quaisoir. "I don't want him touching me again, do you hear?"

"I know. I understand."

"Not ever! Not ever!"

"He won't," Jude said, laying her own hand over Quaisoir's, which was still stroking her face. She laced her fingers through those of her sister and locked them. "He's gone," she said. "He won't be coming near either of us again."

Gentle had indeed retreated as far as the passageway, but even though Jude waved him away he refused to go any

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further. He'd had too many reunions cut short to risk letting her out of his sight.

"Are you certain he's gone?"

"I'm certain."

"He could still be waiting outside for us."

"No, sister. He was afraid for his life. He's fled."

Quaisoir grinned at this. "He was afraid?" she said.

"Terrified,"

"Didn't I tell you? They're all the same. They talk like heroes, but there's piss in their veins." She began to laugh out loud, as careless now as she'd been in terror moments before. "We'll go back to my bedroom," she said when the outburst subsided, "and sleep for a while."

"Whatever you want to do," Jude said. "But let's do it soon."

Still chuckling to herself, Quaisoir allowed Jude to lift her up and escort her towards the door. They had covered maybe half that distance, Gentle standing aside to let them pass, when one of the carbuncles in the ceiling burst and threw down a rain of wreckage from the tower above. Gentle saw Jude struck and felled by a chunk of stone; then the chamber filled with an almost viscous dust that blotted out both sisters in an instant. With his only point of reference the lamp, the flame of which was just visible through the dirt, he headed into the fog to fetch her, as a thundering from above announced a further escalation of the tower's collapse. There was no time for protective feints or for keeping his silence. If he failed to find her in the next few seconds, they'd all be buried. He started to yell her name through the rising roar and, hearing her call back to him, followed her voice to where she was lying, half buried beneath a cairn of rubble.

"There's time," he said to her as he began to dig. "There's time. We can make it out."

With her arms unpinned she began to speed her own excavation, hauling herself up out of the debris and locking her arms around Gentle's neck. He started to stand, pulling her free of the remaining rocks, but as he did so another commotion began, louder than anything that had preceded

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it. This was not the din of destruction but a shriek of white fury. The dust above their heads parted, and Quaisoir appeared, floating inches from the fissured ceiling. Jude had seen this transformation before—ribbons of flesh unfurled from her sister's back and bearing her up—but Gentle had not. He gaped at the apparition, distracted from thoughts of escape.

"She's mine!" Quaisoir yelled, swooping towards them with the same sightless but unerring accuracy she'd possessed in more intimate moments, her arms outstretched, her fingers ready to twist the abductor's head from his neck.

But Jude was quick. She stepped in front of Gentle, calling Quaisoir's name. The woman's swoop faltered, the hungry hands inches from her sister's upturned face.

"I don't belong to you!" she yelled back at Quaisoir. "I don't belong to *anybody!* Hear me?"

Quaisoir threw back her head and loosed a howl of rage at this. It was her undoing. The ceiling shuddered and abandoned its duty at her din, collapsing beneath the weight of rubble heaped behind it. There was, Jude thought, time for Quaisoir to escape the consequences of her cry. She'd seen the woman

move like lightning at Pale Hill, when she had the will to do so. But that will had gone. Face to the killing dirt, she let the debris rain upon her, inviting it with her unbroken cry, which didn't become alarm or plea, but remained a solid howl of fury until the rocks broke and buried her. It wasn't quick. She went on calling down destruction as Gentle took Jude's hand and hauled her away from the spot. He'd lost all sense of direction in the chaos, and had it not been for the screeching of Concupiscentia in the passageway beyond they'd never have made it to the door.

But make it they did, emerging with half their senses deadened by dust. Quaisoir's death cry had ceased by now, but the roar behind them was louder than ever and drove them from the door as the canker spread across the roof of the corridor. They outran it, however, Concupiscentia giving up her keening when she knew her mistress was lost and overtaking them, fleeing to some sanctuary where she could raise a song of lamentation.

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Jude and Gentle ran until they were out from under any stone, roof, arch, or vault that might collapse upon them, into a courtyard full of bees feasting on bushes that had chosen that day, of all days, to blossom. Only then did they put their arms around each other again, each sobbing for private griefs and gratuities, while the ground shook under them to the din of the demolition they'd escaped.

3

In fact the ground didn't stop reverberating until they were well outside the walls of the palace and wandering in the ruins of Yzordderrex. At Jude's suggestion they made their way back at all speed to Peccable's house, where, she explained to Gentle, there was a well-used route between this Dominion and the Fifth. He put up no resistance to this. Though he hadn't exhausted Sartori's hiding places by any means (could he ever, when the palace was so vast?) he *had* exhausted his limbs, his wits, and his will. If his other was still here in Yzordderrex, he posed very little threat. It was the Fifth that needed to be defended against him: the Fifth, which had forgotten magic and could so easily be his victim.

Though the streets of many Kesparates were little more than bloody valleys between rubble mountains, there were sufficient landmarks for Jude to trace her way back towards the district where Peccable's house had stood. There was no certainty, of course, that it would still be standing after a day and a night of cataclysm, but if they had to dig to reach the cellar, so be it.

They were silent for the first mile or so of the trek, but then they began to talk, beginning—invariably—with an explanation from Gentle as to why Quaisoir, hearing his voice, had taken him for her husband. He prefaced his account with the caveat that he wouldn't mire it in apology or justification but would tell it simply, like some grim fable. Then he went on to do precisely that. But the telling, for all its clarity, contained one significant distortion. When he described his encounter with the Autarch he drew in Jude's mind the portrait of a man to whom he bore only a rudimen-

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tary resemblance, a man so steeped in evil that his flesh had been corrupted by his crimes. She didn't question this description, but pictured an individual whose inhumanity seeped from every pore, a monster whose very presence would have induced nausea.

Once he'd unraveled the story of his doubling, she began to supply details of her own. Some were culled from dreams, some from clues she'd had from Quaisoir, yet others from Oscar Godolphin. His entrance

into the account brought with it a fresh cycle of revelations. She started to tell Gentle about her romance with Oscar, which in turn led on to the subject of Dowd, living and dying; thence to Clara Leash and the Tabula Rasa.

"They're going to make it very dangerous for you back in London," she told him, having related what little she knew about the purges they'd undertaken in the name of Roxborough's edicts. "They won't have the slightest compunction about murdering you, once they know who you are."

"Let them try," Gentle said flatly. "Whatever they want to throw at me, I'm ready. I've got work to do, and they're not going to stop me."

"Where will you start?"

"In Clerkenwell. I had a house in Gamut Street. Pie says it's still standing. My life's there, ready for the remembering. We both need the past back, Jude."

"Where do I get mine from?" she wondered aloud.

"From me and from Godolphin."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'd like a less partial source. I've lost Clara, and now Quai-soir. I'll have to start looking." She thought of Celestine as she spoke, lying in darkness beneath the Tabula Rasa's tower.

"Have you got somebody in mind?" Gentle asked.

"Maybe," she said, as reluctant as ever to share that secret.

He caught the whiff of evasion. "I'm going to need help, Jude," he said. "I hope, whatever's been between us in the past—good and bad—we can find some way to work together that'll benefit us both."

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A welcome sentiment, but not one she was willing to open her heart for. She simply said, "Let's hope so," and left it at that.

He didn't press the issue, but turned the conversation to lighter matters. "What was the dream you had?" he asked her. She looked confounded for a moment. "You said you had a dream about me, remember?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "It was nothing, really. Past history."

When they reached Peccable's house it was still intact, though several others in the street had been reduced to blackened rubble by missiles or arsonists. The door stood open, and the interior had been comprehensively looted, down to the tulips and the vase on the dining room table. There was no sign of bloodshed, however, except those scabby stains Dowd had left when he'd first arrived, so she presumed that Hoi-Polloi and her father had escaped unharmed. The signs of frantic thieving did not extend to the cellar. Here, though the shelves had been cleared of the icons, talismans, and idols, the removal had been made calmly and systematically. There was not a rosary remaining, or any sign that the thieves had broken a single charm. The only relic of the cellar's life as a trove was set in the floor the ring of stones that echoed that of the Retreat.

"This is where we arrived," Jude said.

Gentle stared down at the design in the floor. "What is it?" he said. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Does it matter? As long as it gets us back to the Fifth—"

"We've got to be careful from now on," Gentle replied. "Everything's connected. It's all one system. Until we understand our place in the pecking order, we're vulnerable."

One system; she'd speculated on that possibility in the room beneath the tower: the Imajica as a single, infinitely elaborate pattern of transformation. But just as there were times for such musings, so there were also times for action, and she had no patience with Gentle's anxieties now.

"If you know another way out of here," she said, "let's

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take it. But this is the only way I know. Godolphin used it for years and it never harmed him, till Dowd screwed it up."

Gentle had gone down on his haunches and was laying his fingers on the stones that bound the mosaic.

"Circles are so powerful," he said.

"Are we going to use it or not?"

He shrugged. "I don't have a better way," he said, still reluctant. "Do we just step inside?"

"That's all."

He rose. She laid her hand on his shoulder, and hereached up to clasp it.

"We have to hold tight," she said. "I only got a glimpse of the In Ovo, but I wouldn't want to get lost there."

"We won't get lost," he said, and stepped into the circle.

She was with him a heartbeat later, and already the Express was getting up steam. The solid cellar walls and empty shelves began to blur. The forms of their translated selves began to move in their flesh.

The sensation of passage awoke in Gentle memories of the outward journey, when Pie 'oh' pah had stood beside him where Jude was now. Remembering, he felt a stab of inconsolable loss. There were so many people he'd encountered in these Dominions whom he'd never set eyes on again. Some, like Efreed Splendid and his mother, Nikaetomaas, and Huzzah, because they were dead. Others, like Athanasius, because the crimes Sartori had committed were *his* crimes now, and whatever good he hoped to do in the future would never be enough to expunge them. The hurt of these losses was of course negligible beside the greater grief he'd sustained at the Erasure, but he'd not dared dwell too much upon that, for fear it incapacitated him. Now, however, he thought of it, and the tears started to flow, washing the last glimpse of Pecca'ble's cellar away before the mosaic had removed the travelers from it.

Paradoxically, had he been leaving alone the despair might not have cut so deep. But as Pie had been

fond of saying, there was only ever room for three players in any

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drama, and the woman in the flux beside him, her glyph burning through his tears, would from this moment on remind him that he had departed Yzordderrex with one of those three left behind.

7

I

One hundred and fifty-seven days after beginning his journey across the Reconciled Dominions, Gentle once again set foot on the soil of England. Though it wasn't yet the middle of June, spring had arrived prematurely, and the season on its heels was at its height. Flowers not due to blossom for another month were already blowsy and heavy-headed with seeds; bird and insect life abounded, as species that normally appeared months apart flourished simultaneously. This summer's dawns were announced not with choruses but with full-throated choirs; by midday the skies from 'coast to coast were cloudy with feeding millions, the wheels slowing through the afternoon, until by dusk the din had become a music (sated and survivors alike giving thanks for the day) so rich it lulled even the crazy into remedial sleep. If a Reconciliation could indeed be planned and achieved in the little time before midsummer, then it would be a burgeoning country that the rest of the Imajica would greet: an England of bountiful harvests, spread beneath a melodious heaven.

It was full of music now, as Gentle wandered from the Retreat out across the dappled grass to the perimeter of the copse. The parkland was familiar to him, though its lovingly tended arbors were jungles now, and its lawns were veldt.

"This is Joshua's place, isn't it?" he said to Jude. "Which way's the house?"

She pointed across a wilderness of gilded grass. The roof of the mansion was barely visible above the surf of fronds and butterflies.

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"The very first time I saw you was in that house," he told her, "I remember... Joshua called you down the stairs. He had a pet name you despised. Peach blossom, was it? Something like that. As soon as I set eyes on you—"

"It wasn't me," Jude said, halting this romantic reverie. "It was Quaisoir."

"Whatever she was then, you are now."

"I doubt that. It was a long time ago, Gentle. The house is in ruins, and there's only one Godolphin left. History isn't going to repeat itself. I don't want it to. I don't want to be anybody's object."

He acknowledged the warning in these words with an almost formal statement of intent.

"Whatever I did that caused you or anybody else harm," he said, "I want to make good. Whether I did it because I was in love, or because I was a Maestro and I thought I was above common decency. . . . I'm here to heal the hurt. I want Reconciliation, Jude. Between us. Between the Dominions. Between the

living and the dead if I can do it."

"That's a hell of an ambition,"

"The way I see it, I've been given a second chance. Most people don't get that."

His plain sincerity mellowed her. "Do you want to wander to the house, for old time's sake?" she asked him.

"Not unless you do."

"No, thanks. I had my little fit of *deja vu* when I convinced Charlie to bring me here."

Gentle had of course told her about his encounter with Estabrook in the Dearthers' tents and about the man's subsequent demise. She'd been unmoved.

"He was a difficult old bugger, you know," she now remarked. "I must have known in my gut he was a Godolphin, or I'd never have put up with his damn fool games."

"I think he was changed by the end," Gentle said. "Maybe you'd have liked him a little more."

"You've changed too," she said, as they started to wander towards the gate. "People are going to be asking a lot of questions, Gentle. Like: Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

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"Why does anybody even have to know I'm back?" he said. "I never meant that much to any of them, except Tay-lor, and he's gone."

"Clem, too,"

"Maybe."

"It's your choice," she said. "But when you've got so many enemies, you may need some of your friends."

"I'd prefer to stay invisible," he told her. "That way nobody sees me, enemies *or* friends."

As the bounding wall came in sight the skies changed with almost eerie haste, the few fluffy clouds that minutes before had been drifting in the blue now congregating into a lowering bank that first shed a light drizzle and a minute later was bursting like a dam. The downpour had its advantages, however, sluicing from their clothes, hair, and skin all trace of Yzorderrexian dust. By the time they'd clambered through the mesh of timbers and convolvulus around the gate and trudged along the muddied road to the village—there to take shelter in the post office—they could have passed for two tourists (one with a somewhat bizarre taste in hiking clothes) who'd strayed too far from the beaten track and needed help to find their way home.

2

Though neither of them had any valid currency in their pockets, Jude was quick to persuade one of two lads who stopped in the post office to drive them back into London, promising a healthy fee at the other end if he did so. The storm worsened as they traveled, but Gentle rolled down the window in the back

and stared at the passing panorama of an England he hadn't seen for half a year, content to let the rain soak him all over again.

Jude was meanwhile left to endure a monologue from their driver. He had a mutinous palate; which rendered every third word virtually unintelligible, but the gist of his chatter was plain enough. It was the opinion of every weather watcher he knew, he said, and these were folk who lived by the land and had ways of predicting floods and

droughts no fancy-talking meteorologist ever had, that the country was in for a disastrous summer.

"We'll either be cooked or drowned," he said, prophesying months of monsoons and heatwaves.

She'd heard talk like this before, of course; the weather was an English obsession. But having come from the ruins of Yzordderrex, with the burning eye of the comet overhead and the air stinking of death, the youth's casually apocalyptic chatter disturbed her. It was as if he was willing some cataclysm to overtake his little world, not comprehending for a moment what that implied.

When he grew bored with predicting ruination, he started to ask her questions about where she and her friend had been coming from or going to when the storm had caught them. She saw no reason not to tell him they'd been at the estate, so she did so. Her reply earned her what studied disinterest had failed to achieve for three quarters of an hour: his silence. He gave her a baleful look in the mirror and then turned on the radio, proving, if nothing else, that the shadow of the Godolphin family was sufficient to hush even a doomsayer. They traveled to the outskirts of London without further exchange, the youth only breaking the silence when he needed directions.

"Do you want to be dropped at the studio?" she asked Gentle.

He was slow to answer, but when he did it was to reply that, yes, that's where he wanted to go. Jude furnished instructions to the driver and then turned her gaze back towards Gentle. He was still staring out the window, rainspeckling his brow and cheeks like sweat, drops hanging off his nose, chin, and eyelashes. The smallest of smiles curled the corners of his mouth. Catching him unawares like this, she almost regretted her dismissal of his overtures at the estate. This face, for all that the mind behind it had done, was the face that had appeared to her while she slept in Quai-soir's bed: the dream lover whose imagined caresses had brought from her cries so loud her sister had heard them two rooms away. Certainly, they could never again be the lovers who'd courted in the great house two centuries

before. But their shared history marked them in ways they had yet to discover, and perhaps when those discoveries were all made they'd find a way to put into flesh the deed she dreamed in Quai-soir's bed.

The rainstorm had preceded them to the city, unleashed its torrent, and moved off, so that by the time they reached the outskirts there was sufficient blue sky overhead to promise a warm, if glistening, evening. The traffic was still clogged, however, and the last three miles of the journey took almost as long as the previous thirty. By the time they reached Gentle's studio their driver, used to the quiet roads around the estate, was out of sympathy with the whole endeavor and had several times broken his silence to curse the traffic and warn his passengers that he was going to require very considerable recompense for his troubles.

Jude got out of the car along with Gentle and on the studio step—out of the driver's earshot—asked him if he had enough money inside to pay the man. She would rather take a taxi from here, she said, than endure his company any longer. Gentle replied that if there was any cash in the studio, it certainly wouldn't be sufficient.

"It looks like I'm stuck with him then," Jude said. "Never mind. Do you want me to come up with you? Have you got a key?"

"There'll be somebody in downstairs," he replied. "They've got a spare."

"Then I suppose this is it." It was so bathetic, parting like this after all that had gone before. "I'll ring you when we've both slept"

"The phone's probably been cut off."

"Then ring me from a box, huh? I won't be at Oscar's, I'll be at home."

The conversation might have guttered out there, but for his reply.

"Don't stay away from him on my account," he said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just that you've got your love affairs," he said.

"And what? You've got yours?"

"Not exactly."

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"What then?"

"I mean, not exactly love affairs." He shook his head. "Never mind. We'll talk about it some other time."

"No," Jude told him, taking his arm as he tried to turn from her. "We'll talk about it now."

Gentle sighed wearily. "Look, it doesn't matter," he said.

"If it doesn't matter, just tell me."

He hesitated for several seconds. Then he said, "I got married."

"Did you indeed?" she said, with feigned lightness. "And who's the lucky girl? Not the kid you were talking about?"

"Huzzah? Good God, no."

He paused for a tiny time, frowning deeply.

"Go on," she said. "Spit it out."

"I married Pie 'oh' pah."

Her first impulse was to laugh—the thought was absurd—but before the sound escaped her she caught the frown on his face and revulsion overtook laughter. This was no joke. He'd married the assassin, the sexless thing who was a function of its lover's every desire. And why was she so stunned? When Oscar had described the species to her, hadn't she herself remarked that it was Gentle's idea of paradise?

"That's some secret," she said.

"I would have told you about it sooner or later."

Now she allowed herself a little laughter, soft and sour. "Back there you almost had me believing there was something between us."

"That's because there was," he replied. "Because there always will be."

"Why should that matter to you now?"

"I have to hold on to a little of what I was. What I dreamed."

"And what did you dream?"

"That the three of us—" He stopped, sighing. Then: "That the three of us would find some way to be together." He wasn't looking at her but at the empty ground between

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them, where he'd clearly wanted his beloved Pie to stand. "The mystic would have learned to love you," he said.

"I don't want to hear this," she snapped.

"It would have been anything you desired. *Anything.*"

"Stop," she told him. "Just *stop.*"

He shrugged. "It's all right," he said. "Pie's dead. And we're going our different ways. It was just some stupid dream I had. I thought you'd want to know it, that's all."

"I don't want anything from you," she replied coldly. "You can keep your lunacies to yourself from now on!"

She'd long since let go of his arm, leaving him to retreat up the steps. But he didn't go. He simply stood watching her, squinting like a drunkard trying to hook one thought to another. It was she who retreated, shaking her head as she turned her back on him and crossed the puddled pavement to the car. Once in, the door slammed, she told the driver to get going, and— the car sped from the curb.

On the step Gentle watched the corner where the car turned long after the vehicle had gone from sight, as

though some words of peace might yet come to his lips and be carried from them to call her back. But he was out of persuasions. Though he'd returned to his place as a Reconciler, he knew he'd here opened a wound he lacked the gift to heal, at least until he'd slept and recovered his faculties.

3

Forty-five minutes after she'd left Gentle on his doorstep, Jude was throwing open the windows of her house to let in the late-afternoon sun and some fresh air. The journey from the studio had passed with her scarcely being aware of the fact, so stunned had she been by Gentle's revelation. Married! The thought was absurd, except that she couldn't find it in herself to be amused.

Though it was now many weeks since she'd occupied the house (all but the hardiest of her plants had died from loneliness, and she'd forgotten how the percolator and the lock on the windows worked), it was still a place she felt at home in, and by the time she'd downed a couple of cups of coffee,

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showered, and changed into some clean clothes, the Dominion from which she'd stepped only hours before was receding. In the presence of so many familiar sights and smells the strangeness of Yzordderrex wasn't its strength but its frailty. Without invitation, her mind had already drawn a line between the place she'd left and the one which she was now in, as solid as the division between a thing dreamt and a thing lived. No wonder Oscar had made a ritual of going up to his treasure room, she thought, and communing with his collection. It was a way of holding on to a perception that was under constant siege by the commonplace.

With several jolts of coffee buzzing around her bloodstream, the fatigue she'd felt on the journey back into the city had disappeared, so she decided to use the evening to visit Oscar's house. She'd called him several times since she'd got back, but the fact that nobody had answered was not, she knew, proof of his absence or demise. He'd seldom picked up the telephone in the house—that duty had fallen to Dowd—and more than once he'd stated his abhorrence of the machines. In paradise, he'd once said, the common blessed use telegrams and the saints have talking doves; all the telephones are down below.

She left the house at seven or so, caught a cab, and went to Regent's Park Road. She found the house securely locked, without so much as a window standing ajar, which on such a clement evening surely meant there was nobody home. Just to be sure, she went around to the rear of the house and peered in. At the sight of her, the three parrots Oscar kept in the back room rose from their perches in alarm. Nor did they settle, but squawked on in panic as she cupped her hands over her brow and peered in to see if their seed and water bowls were full. Though their perches were too far from the window for her to see, their level of agitation was enough to make her fear the worst Oscar, she suspected, hadn't soothed their feathers in a long time. Somewhere was he? Back at the estate, lying dead in the long grass? If so, it would be folly to go back there now and look for him, with darkness an hour away at most. Besides, when she thought back to her last glimpse of him, she was reason-

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ably certain she'd seen him rising to his feet, framed against the door. He was robust, despite his excesses. She couldn't believe he was dead. In hiding, more like: concealing himself from the Tabula Rasa. With that thought in mind she returned to the front door and scribbled an anonymous note, telling him she was alive and well, and slipped it into the letter box. He'd know who'd penned it. Who else would write that the Express had brought her home, safe and sound?

A little after ten-thirty she was preparing for bed when she heard somebody calling her name from the street. She went to the balcony and looked out to see Clem standing on the pavement below, hollering for all he was worth. It was many months since they'd spoken, and her pleasure at the sight of him was tinged with guilt at her neglect. But from the relief in his voice at her appearance, and the fervor of his hug, she knew he hadn't come to squeeze apologies out of her. He needed to tell her something extraordinary, he said, but before he did (she'd think he was crazy, he warned), he needed a drink. Could she get him a brandy?

She could and did.

He fairly guzzled it, then said, "Where's Gentle?"

The question, and his demanding tone, caught her off guard, and she floundered. Gentle wanted to be invisible, and furious as she was with him, she felt obliged to respect that wish. But Clem needed to know badly.

"He's been away, hasn't he? Klein told me he tried calling, but the phone was cut off. Then he wrote Gentle a letter, and it was never answered—"

"Yes," Jude said. "I believe he's been away."

"But he just came back."

"Did he?" she replied, more puzzled by the moment. "Maybe you know better than I do."

"Not me," he said, pouring himself another brandy. "Taylor."

"Taylor? What are you talking about?"

Clem downed the liquor. "You're going to say I'm crazy, but hear me out, will you?"

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"I'm listening."

"I haven't been sentimental about losing him. I haven't sat at home reading his love letters and listening to the songs we danced to. I've tried to get out and be useful for a change. But I have left his room the way it was. I couldn't bring myself to go through his clothes or even strip the bed. I kept putting it off. And the more I didn't do it, the more impossible it seemed to be. Then tonight, I came in just after eight, and I heard somebody talking."

Every particle of Clem's body but his lips was still as he spoke, transfixed by the memory.

"I thought I'd left the radio on, but no, no, I realized it was coming from upstairs, from his bedroom. It was *him*, Judy, talking clear as day, calling me up the way he used to. I was so afraid I almost fled. Stupid, isn't it? There I was, praying and praying for some sign he was in God's hands, and as soon as it came I practically shat myself. I tell you, I was half an hour on the stairs, hoping he'd stop calling me. And sometimes he did for a while, and I'd half convince myself I'd imagined it. Then he'd start again. Nothing melodramatic. Just him trying to persuade me not to be afraid and come up and say hello. So, eventually,

that's what I did."

His eyes were filling with tears, but there was no grief in his voice.

"He liked that room in the evening. The sun fills it up. That's what it was like tonight: full of sun. And he was there, in the light. I couldn't see him but I knew he was next to me because he said so. He told me I looked well. Then he said, 'It's a glad day, Clem. Gentle came back, and he's got the answers.'"

"What answers?" Jude said.

"That's what I asked him. I said, 'What answers, Tay?' But you know Tay when he's happy. He gets delirious, like a child." Clem spoke with a smile, his gaze on sights remembered from better days. "He was so full of the fact that Gentle was back, I couldn't get much more from him."

Clem looked up at Jude.

"The light was going," he said. "And I think he wanted

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to go with it. He said that it was our duty to help Gentle. That was why he was showing himself to me this way. It wasn't easy, he said. But then neither was being a guardian angel. And I said, 'Why only one? One angel when there's two of us?' And he said, 'Because we *are* one, Clem, you and I. We always were, and we always will be. Those were his exact words, I swear. Then he went away. And you know what I kept thinking?'"

"What?"

"That I wished I hadn't waited on the stairs and wasted all that time I could have had with him," Clem set down his glass, pulled a tissue from his pocket, and blew his nose. "That's all," he said.

"I think that's plenty."

"I know what you're thinking," he said with a little laugh. "You're thinking, 'Poor Clem. He couldn't grieve so he's having hallucinations.'"

"No," she said, very softly. "I'm thinking, 'Gentle doesn't know how lucky he is, having angels like you two.'"

"Don't humor me."

"I'm not," she said. "I believe everything you've just told me happened."

"You do?"

"Yes."

Again, a laugh. "Why?"

"Because Gentle came home tonight, Clem, and I was the only one who knew it."

He left ten minutes later, apparently content to know that even if he was crazy there was another lunatic in his circle he could turn to when he wanted to share his insanities. Jude told him as much as she felt able at this juncture, which was very little, but she promised to contact Gentle on Clem's behalf and tell him about Taylor's visitation. Clem wasn't so grateful that he was blinded to her discretion.

"You know a lot more than you're telling me, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "But maybe in a little while I'll be able to tell you more."

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"Is Gentle in danger?" Clem asked. "Can you tell me that at least?"

"We all are," she said. "You. Me. Gentle. Taylor."

"Taylor's dead," Clem said. "He's in the light. Nothing can hurt him."

"I hope you're right," she said grimly. "But please, Clem, if he finds you again—"

"He will."

"—then when he does, tell him nobody's safe. Just because Gentle's back in the—back home doesn't mean the troubles are over. In fact, they're just beginning."

"Tay says something sublime's going to happen. That's his word: sublime."

"And maybe it will. But there's a lot of room for error. And if anything goes wrong—" She halted, her head filled with memories of the In Ovo and the ruins of Yzordderrex.

"Well, whenever you feel you can tell me," Clem said, "we'll be ready to hear. Both of us." He glanced at his watch. "I should be out of here. I'm late."

"Party?"

"No, I'm working with a hospice for the homeless. We're out most nights, trying to get kids off the streets. The city's full of them." She took him to the door, but before he stepped out he said, "You remember our pagan party at Christmas?"

She grinned. "Of course. That was quite a shindig."

"Tay got stinking drunk after everybody had gone. He knew he wasn't going to be seeing most of them again. Then of course he got sick in the middle of the night, so we stayed up together talking about—oh, I don't know, everything under the sun. And he told me how much he'd always loved Gentle. How Gentle was the mystery man in his life. He'd been dreaming about him, he said: speaking in tongues."

"He told me the same thing," Jude said.

"Then, out of the blue, he said that next year I should have the Nativity back, and go to Midnight Mass the way we used to, and I told him I thought we'd decided none of that made much sense. And you know what he said to me? He said light was light, whatever name you call it, and it was

better to think of it coming in a face you knew." Clem smiled. "I thought he was talking about Christ. But now... now I'm not so sure."

She hugged him hard, pressing her lips against his flushed cheek. Though she suspected that there was truth in what he said, she couldn't bring herself to voice the possibility. Not knowing that the same face Tay had imagined as that of the returning sun was also the face of the darkness that might soon eclipse them all.

8

I

Though the bed Gentle had collapsed into the night before had been stale, and the pillow beneath his head damp, he couldn't have slept more soundly had he been rocked in the arms of Mother Earth Herself. When he woke, fifteen hours later, it was to a fine June morning, and the dreamless time behind him had put new strength into his sinews. There was no gas, electricity, or hot water, so he was obliged to shower and shave in cold water, which was respectively a bracing and a bloody experience. That done, he took some time to assess the state of the studio. It had not remained entirely untouched in his absence. At some juncture either an old girlfriend or a very particular thief had come in—he'd left two of the windows open, so gaining access had presented no difficulty—and the interloper had stolen both clothes and more private bric-a-brac. It was such a long time since he'd been here, however, that he couldn't remember precisely what was missing: some letters and postcards from the mantelpiece, a few photographs (though he'd not liked to be recorded this way, for what were now obvious reasons), and a few items of jewelry (a gold chain; two rings; a crucifix). The theft didn't much bother him. He'd never been a sentimentalist or a hoarder. Objects were like glossy magazines: fetching for a day, then readily discarded.

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There were other, more disgusting, signs of his absence in the bathroom, where clothes he'd left to dry before his departure had grown green fur, and in the refrigerator, the shelves of which were scattered with what looked like pupating zarzi, stinking of putrefaction. Before he could really begin to clean up he had to have some power in the house, and to get it would require some politicking. He'd had the gas, telephone, and electricity cut off in the past, when, in the lean times between forgeries and sugar mamas, he'd run out of funds. But he had the patter to get them turned back on again well honed, and that had to be the priority of the hour.

He dressed in the freshest of his clothes and went down stairs to present himself to the venerable but dotty Mrs. Erskine, who occupied the ground-floor flat. It was she who'd let him in the day before, remarking with her characteristic candor that he looked as though he'd been kicked half to death, to which he'd replied that he felt the same way. She didn't question his absence, which was not surprising given that his occupation of the studio had always been sporadic, but she did ask him if he was going to be staying awhile this time. He said he thought so, and she replied that she was pleased at this, because during these summer days people always got crazy, and since Mr. Erskine's death she was sometimes frightened.

She made tea while he availed himself of her telephone, calling around the services he'd lost. It turned out to be a frustrating business. He'd lost the knack of charming the women he spoke to into some action on his behalf. Instead of an exchange of flatteries he was served a chilly salad of officiousness and

condescension. He had unpaid bills, he was told, and his supplies would not be reconnected until payment was forthcoming. He ate some toast Mrs. Erskine had made, drank several cups of tea, then went down into the basement and left a note for the caretaker that he was now back in residence and could he please have his hot water turned on.

That done, he ascended to the studio again and bolted

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the door behind him. One conversation for the day was enough, he'd decided. He drew the blinds at the windows and lit two candles. They smoked as their dusty wicks first burned, but their light was kinder than the glare of the day, and by it he started to go through the snowdrift of mail that had gathered behind the door. There were bills in abundance, of course, printed in increasingly irate colors, plus the inevitable junk mail. There were very few personal letters, but among them were two that gave him pause. Both were from Vanessa, whose advice that he should slit his lying throat had found such a distressing echo in Athanasius' exhortation at the Erasur. Now she wrote that she missed him, and a day didn't go by without her thinking of him. The second missive was even more direct. She wanted him back in her life. If he wanted to play around with other women she would learn to accommodate that. Would he not at least make contact with her? Life was too short to bear grudges, on either side.

He was buoyed up somewhat by her appeals, and even more so by a letter from Klein, scrawled in red ink on pink paper. Chester's faintly camp tones rose from the page as Gentle scanned it.

Dear Bastard -Boy, Klein had written. *Whose heart are you breaking*, and where? Scores of forlorn women are presently weeping on my lap, begging me to forgive you your trespasses and invite you back into the bosom of the family. Among them, the delectable Vanessa. For God's sake come home and save me from seducing her. My groin is wet for you,

So Vanessa had gone to Klein; desperation indeed. Though she'd met Chester only once that Gentle could recall, she'd subsequently professed to loathing him. Gentle kept all three letters, though he had no intention of acting upon their appeals. There was only one reunion he was eager for, and that was with the house in Clerkenwell. He couldn't face the idea of venturing out in daylight, however. The streets would be too bright and too busy. He'd wait until dark, when he could move across the city as the invis-

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ble he aspired to be. He set a match to the rest of the letters and watched them burn. Then he went back to bed and slept through the afternoon in preparation for the business of the night.

2

He waited until the first stars appeared in a sky of elegiac blue before he raised the blinds. The street outside was quiet, but given that he lacked the cash for a cab he knew he'd have to brush shoulders with a lot of people before he reached Clerkenwell. On a fine evening like this, the Edg-ware Road would be busy, and there'd be crowds on the Underground. His best hope of reaching his destination un-scrutinized was to dress as blandly as possible, and he took some time hunting through his depleted wardrobe for those clothes that would render him most invisible. Once dressed, he walked down to Marble Arch and boarded the Underground. It was only five stations to Chancery Lane, which would put him on the borders of Clerkenwell, but after two he had to get off, gasping and sweating like a claustrophobic. Cursing this new weakness in himself, he sat in the station for half an hour while more trains passed

through, unable to bring himself to board. What an irony! Here he was, a sometime wanderer in the wilds of the Imajica, incapable of traveling a couple of miles by tube without panicking. He waited until his shaking subsided and a less crowded train came along. Then he reboarded, sitting close to the door with his head in his hands until the journey was over. By the time he emerged at Chancery Lane the sky had darkened, and he stood for several minutes on High Holborn, his head thrown back, soaking up the sky. Only when the tremors had left his legs did he head up Gray's Inn Road towards the environs of Gamut Street. Almost all the property on the main thoroughfares had long since been turned to commercial use, but there was a network of streets and squares behind the barricade of darkened office buildings which, protected perhaps by the patronage of notoriety, had been left untouched by the developers. Many of these

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streets were narrow and mazy, their lamps unlit, their signs missing, as though blind eyes had been turned to them over the generations. But he didn't need signs and lamps; his feet had trodden these ways countless times. Here was Shiverick Square, with its little park all overgrown, and Flaxen Street, and Almoth, and Sterne. And in their midst, cocooned by anonymity, his destination.

He saw the corner of Gamut Street twenty yards ahead and slowed his pace to take pleasure in the moment of reunion. There were innumerable memories awaiting him there, the mystic among them. But not all would be so sweet, or so welcome. He would have to ingest them carefully, like a diner with a delicate stomach coming to a lavish table. Moderation was the way. As soon as he felt a surfeit, he'd retreat and return to the studio to digest what he'd learned, let it strengthen him. Only then would he return for a second helping. The process would take time, he knew, and time was of the essence. But so was his sanity. What use would he be as a Reconciler if he choked on the past?

With his heart thumping hard, he came to the corner and, turning it, finally laid his eyes upon the sacred street. Perhaps, during his years of forgetfulness, he'd wandered through these backwaters all unknowing and seen the sight before him now. But he doubted it. More likely, his eyes were seeing Gamut Street for the first time in two centuries. It had changed scarcely at all, preserved from the city planners and their hammer-wielding hordes by the feits whose makers were still rumored here. The trees planted along the pavement were weighed down with unkempt foliage, but their sap's tang was sharp, the air protected from the fumes of Holborn and Gray's Inn Road by the warren of thoroughfares between. Was it just his fancy, or was the tree outside number 28 particularly lush, fed perhaps by a seepage of magics from the step of the Maestro's house?

He began towards them, tree and step, the memories already returning in force. He heard the children singing behind him, the song that had so tormented him when the Autarch had told him who he was. *Sartori*, he'd said, and this charmless ditty, sung by piping voices, had come in pur-

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suit of the name. He'd loathed it then. Its melody was banal; its words were nonsense. But now he remembered how he'd first heard it, walking along this very pavement with the children in procession on the opposite shore, and how flattered he'd been that he was famous enough to have reached the lips of children who would never read or write or, most probably, reach the age of puberty. All of London knew who he was, and he liked his fame. He was talked about at court, Roxborough said, and should soon expect an invitation. People who'd not so much as touched his sleeve were reclaiming intimate association.

But there were still those, thank God, who kept an exquisite distance, and one such soul had lived, he remembered, in the house opposite: a nymph called Allegra who liked to sit at her dressing table near the window with her bodice half unlaced, knowing she had an admirer in the Maestro across the street. She'd had a little curly-haired dog, and sometimes in the evening he'd hear her piping voice summon the lucky hound onto her lap, where she'd let it snuggle. One afternoon, a few paces from where he stood now, he'd met the girl out walking with her mother and had made much of the dog, suffering its little tongue on his mouth for the smell of her sex in its fur. What had become of that child? Had she died a virgin or grown old and fat, wondering about the man who'd been her most ardent admirer?

He glanced up at the window where Allegra had sat. No light burned in it now. The house, like almost all these buildings, was dark. Sighing, he turned his gaze towards number 28 and, crossing the street, went to the door. It was locked, of course, but one of the lower windows had been broken at some point and never repaired. He reached through the smashed pane and unlocked it, then slid the window up and himself inside. Slowly, he reminded himself: go slowly. Keep the flow under control.

It was dark, but he'd come prepared for that eventuality, with candle and matches. The flame guttered at first, and the room rocked at its indecision, but by degrees it strengthened, and he felt a sensation he'd not expected swelling like

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the light: pride. In its time, this, his house, had been a place of great souls and great ambition, where all commonplace debate had been banned. If you wanted to talk politics or tittle-tattle you went to the coffee house; if you wanted commerce, to the Exchange. Here, only miracles. Here, only the rising of the spirit. And, yes, love, if it was pertinent (which it was, so often); and sometimes bloodletting. But never the prosaic, never the trivial. Here the man who brought the strangest tale was the most welcome. Here every excess was celebrated if it brought visions, and every vision analyzed for the hints it held to the nature of the Everlasting.

He lifted the candle and, holding it high, began to walk through the house. The rooms—there were many—were badly dilapidated, the boards creaking under his feet, weakened by rot and worm, the walls mapping continents of damp. But the present didn't insist upon him for long. By the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, memory was lighting candles everywhere, their luminescence spilling through the dining room door and from the rooms above. It was a generous light, clothing naked walls, putting lush carpets underfoot, and setting fine furniture on their pile. Though the debaters here might have aspired to pure spirit, they were not averse to comforting the flesh while still cursed with it. Who would have guessed, seeing the modest facade of the house from the street, that the interior would be so finely furnished and ornamented? And seeing these glories appear, he heard the voices of those who'd wallowed in that luxury. Laughter first; then vociferous argument from somebody at the top of the stairs. He couldn't see the debaters yet—perhaps his mind, which he'd instructed in caution, was holding the flood back—but he could put names to both of them, sight unseen. One was Horace Tyrwhitt, the other Isaac Abelove. And the laughter? That was Joshua Godolphin, of course. He had a laugh like the Devil's laugh, full and throaty.

"Come on, then," Gentle said aloud to the memories. "I'm ready to see your faces."

And as he spoke, they came: Tyrwhitt on the stairs, over-

dressed and overpowdered, as ever, keeping his distance from Abelove in case the magpie his pursuer was nursing flew free.

"It's bad luck," Tyrwhitt was protesting. "Birds in the house are bad luck!"

"Luck's for fishermen and gamblers," Abelove replied.

"One of these days you'll turn a phrase worth remembering," Tyrwhitt replied. "Just get the thing out before I wring its neck." He turned towards Gentle. "Tell him, Sartori."

Gentle was shocked to see the memory's eyes fix so acutely upon him. "It does no harm," he found himself replying. "It's one of God's creatures."

At which point the bird rose flapping from Abelove's grasp, emptying its bowels as it did so on the man's wig and face, which brought a hoot of laughter from Tyrwhitt.

"Now don't wipe it off," he told Abelove as the magpie fluttered away. "It's good luck."

The sound of his laughter brought Joshua Godolphin, imperious as ever, out of the dining room. "What's the row?"

Abelove was already clattering after the bird, his calls merely alarming it more. It fluttered around the hallway in panic, cawing as it went.

"Open the damned door!" Godolphin said. "Let the bloody thing out!"

"And spoil the sport?" Tyrwhitt said.

"If everyone would but calm their voices," Abelove said, "it would settle."

"Why did you bring it in?" Joshua wanted to know.

"It was sitting on the step," Abelove replied. "I thought it was injured."

"It looks quite well to me," Godolphin said, and turned his face, ruddied with brandy, towards Gentle. "Maestro," he said, inclining his head a little. "I'm afraid we began dinner without you. Come in. Leave these bird brains to play."

Gentle was crossing to the dining room when there was a thud behind him, and he turned to see the bird dropping to the floor beneath one of the windows, where it had struck

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the glass. Abelove let out a little moan, and Tyrwhitt's slaughter ceased.

"There now!" he said. "You killed the thing!"

"Not me!" Abelove said.

"You want to resurrect it?" Joshua murmured to Gentle, his tone conspiratorial.

"With a broken neck and wings?" Gentle mourned. "That wouldn't be very kind."

"But amusing," Godolphin replied with mischief in his puffy eyes.

"I think not," Gentle said, and saw his distaste wipe the humor off Joshua's face. He's a little afraid of me, Gentle thought; the power in me makes him nervous.

Joshua headed into the dining room, and Gentle was about to step through the door after him when a young man—eighteen at most, with a plain, long face and chiselled curls—came to his side.

"Maestro?" he said.

Unlike Joshua and the others, these features seemed more familiar to Gentle. Perhaps there was a certain modernity in the languid lidded gaze and the small, almost effeminate, mouth. He didn't look that intelligent, in truth, but his words, when they came, were well turned, despite the boy's nervousness. He barely dared look at Sartori, but with those lids downcast begged the Maestro's indulgence.

"I wondered, sir, if you had perhaps considered the matter of which we spoke?"

Gentle was about to ask, What matter?, when his tongue replied, his intellect seizing the memory as the words spilled out. "I know how eager you are, Lucius."

Lucius Cobbitt was the boy's name. At seventeen he already had the great works by heart, or at least their theses. Ambitious and apt at politics, he'd taken Tyrwhitt as a patron (for what services only his bed knew, but it was surely a hanging offense) and had secured himself a place in the house as a menial. But he wanted more than that, and scarcely an evening went by without his politely plying the Maestro with coy glances and pleas.

"I'm more than eager, sir," he said. "I've studied all the

rituals. I've mapped the In Ovo, from what I've read in Flute's *Visions*. They're just beginnings, I know, but I've also copied all the known glyphs, and I have them by heart."

He had a little skill as an artist, too: something else they shared, besides ambition and dubious morals.

"I can help you, Maestro," he was saying. "You're going to need somebody beside you on the night."

"I commend you on your discipline, Lucius, but the Reconciliation's a dangerous business. I can't take the responsibility—"

"I'll take that, sir."

"Besides, I have my assistant."

The boy's face fell. "You do?" he said.

"Certainly. Pie 'oh' pah."

"You'd trust your life to a familiar?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, because... because it's not even human."

"That's why I trust it, Lucius," Gentle said. "I'm sorry to disappoint you—"

"Could I at least *watch*, sir? I'll keep my distance, I swear, I swear. Everybody else is going to be there."

This was true enough. As the night of the Reconciliation approached, the size of the audience swelled. His patrons, who'd at first taken their oaths of secrecy very seriously, now sensed triumph and had become indiscreet. In hushed and often embarrassed tones they'd admit to having invited a friend or a relation to witness the rites, and who was he, the performer, to forbid his paymasters their moment of reflected glory? Though he never gave them an easy time when they made these confessions, he didn't much mind. Admiration charged the blood. And when the Reconciliation had been achieved, the more tongues there were to say they'd seen it done, and sanctify the doer, the better.

"I beg you, sir," Lucius was saying. "I'll be in your debt forever."

Gentle nodded, ruffling the youth's ginger hair. "You may watch," he said.

Tears started to the boy's eyes, and he snatched up Gen-

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tie's hand, laying his lips to it. "I am the luckiest man in England," he said. "Thank you, sir, thank you."

Quieting the boy's profusions, Gentle left him at the door and stepped through into the dining room. As he did so he wondered if all these events and conversations had actually dovetailed in this fashion, or whether his memory was collecting fragments from different nights and days, knitting them together so that they appeared seamless. If the latter was the case—and he guessed it was—then there were probably clues in these scenes to mysteries yet to be unveiled, and he should try to remember their every detail. But it was difficult. He was both Gentle and Sartori here, both witness and actor. It was hard to live the moments when he was also observing them, and harder still to dig for the seam of their significance when their surface gleamed so fetchingly, and when he was the brightest jewel that shone there. How they had idolized him! He'd been like a divinity among them, his every belch and fart attended to like a sermon, his cosmological pronouncements—of which he was too fond—greeted with reverence and gratitude, even by the mightiest.

Three of those mighty awaited him in the dining room, gathered at one end of a table, set for four but laden with sufficient food to sate the street for a week. Joshua was one of the trio, of course. Roxborough and his long-time foil Oliver McGann were the others, the latter well in his cups, the former, as ever, keeping his counsel, his ascetic features, dominated by the long hook of his nose, always half masked by his hands. He despised his mouth, Gentle thought, because it betrayed his nature, which despite his incalculable wealth and his pretensions to metaphysics was peevish, penurious, and sullen.

"Religion's for the faithful," McGann was loudly opining. "They say their prayers, their prayers aren't answered, and their faith increases. Whereas magic—" He stopped, laying his inebriated gaze on the Maestro at the door. "Ah! The very man! The *very* man! Tell him, Sartori! Tell him what magic is."

Roxborough had made a pyramid of his fingers, the apex

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at the bridge of his nose. "Yes, Maestro," he said. "Do tell."

"My pleasure," Gentle replied, taking the glass of wine McGann poured for him and wetting his throat before he provided tonight's profundities. "Magic is the first and last religion of the world," he said. "It has the power to make us whole. To open our eyes to the Dominions and return us to ourselves."

"That sounds very fine," Roxborough said flatly. "But what does it mean?"

"It's obvious what it means," McGann protested.

"Not to me it isn't."

"It means we're born divided, Roxborough," the Maestro replied. "But we long for union."

"Oh, we do, do we?"

"I believe so."

"And why should we seek union with ourselves?" Roxborough said. "Tell me that. I would have thought we're the only company we're certain we have."

There was a riling smugness to the man's tone, but the Maestro had heard these niceties before and had his answers well honed.

"Everything that isn't us is also ourselves," he said. He came to the table and set down his glass, peering through the smoky candle flames at Roxborough's black eyes. "We're joined to everything that was, is, and will be," he said. "From one end of the Imajica to another. From the tiniest mote dancing over this flame to the Godhead Itself."

He took breath, leaving room for a retort from Roxborough. But none came.

"We'll not be subsumed at our deaths," he went on. "We'll be increased: to the size of Creation."

"Yes..." McGann said, the word coming long and loud from between teeth clenched in a tigerish smile.

"Magic's our means to that Revelation," the Maestro said, "while we're still in our flesh."

"And is it your opinion that we are *given* that Revelation?" Roxborough replied. "Or are we stealing it?"

"We were born to know as much as we *can* know."

"We were born to suffer in our flesh," Roxborough said.

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"You may suffer; I don't."

The reply won a guffaw from McGann.

"The flesh isn't punishment," the Maestro said, "it's there for joy. But it also marks the place where we end and the rest of Creation begins. Or so we believe. It's an illusion, of course."

"Good," said Godolphin. "I like that."

"So are we about God's business or not?" Roxborough wanted to know.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Third and fourth, more like," McGann said.

Roxborough gave the man at his side a sour glance. "Did we swear an oath not to doubt?" he said. "I don't think so. Why should I be castigated because I ask a simple question?"

"I apologize," McGann said. "Tell the man, Maestro. We're doing God's work, aren't we?"

"Does God want us to be more than we are?" Gentle said. "Of course. Does God want us to love, which is the desire to be joined and made whole? Of course. Does It want us in Its glory, forever and ever? Yes, It does."

"You always say It," McGann observed. "Why's that?"

"Creation and its maker are one and the same. True or false?"

"True."

"And Creation's as full of women as it is of men. True or false?"

"Oh, true, true."

"Indeed, I give thanks for the fact night and day," Gentle said, glancing at Godolphin as he spoke. "Beside my bed and in it."

Joshua laughed his Devil's laugh.

"So the Godhead is both male and female. For convenience, an It."

"Bravely said!" Joshua announced. "I never tire of hearing you speak, Sartori. My thoughts get muddy, but after I've listened to you awhile they're like spring water, straight from the rock!"

"Not too clean, I hope," the Maestro said. "We don't want any Puritan souls spoiling the Reconciliation."

"You know me better than that," Joshua said, catching Gentle's eye.

Even as he did so, Gentle had proof of his suspicion that these encounters, though remembered in one

continuous stream, had not occurred sequentially but were fragments his mind was knitting together as the rooms he was walking through evoked them. McGann and Roxborough faded from the table, as did most of the candlelight and the litter of carafes, glasses, and food it had illuminated. Now there was only Joshua and himself, and the house was stilt above and below. Everyone asleep, but for these conspirators.

"I want to be with you when you perform the working," Joshua was saying. There was no hint of laughter now. He looked harassed and nervous. "She's very precious to me, Sartori. If anything were to happen to her I'd lose my mind."

"She'll be perfectly safe," the Maestro said, sitting down at the table.

There was a map of the Imajica laid out in front of him, with the names of the Maestros and their assistants in each Dominion marked beside their places of conjuration. He scanned them and found he knew one or two. Tick Raw was there, as the deputy to Uter Musky; Scopique was there too, marked as an assistant to an assistant to Heratae Ham-meryock, the latter a distant relation, perhaps, of the Ham-meryock whom Gentle and Pie had encountered in Vanaeph. Names from two pasts, intersecting here on the map.

"Are you listening to me?" Joshua said.

"I told you she'd be perfectly safe," came the Maestro's reply. "The workings are delicate, but they're not dangerous."

"Then let me be there," Godolphin said, wringing his hands. "I'll be your assistant instead of that wretched mystic."

"I haven't even told Pie 'oh' pah what we're up to. This is

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our business and only ours. You just bring Judith here to-morrow evening, and I'll see to the rest."

"She's so vulnerable."

"She seems very self-possessed to me," the Maestro observed. "Very heated."

Godolphin's fretful expression soured into ice. "Don't parade it, Sartori," he said. "It's not enough that I've got Roxborough at my ear all yesterday, telling me he doesn't trust you; I have to bear you parading your arrogance."

"Roxborough understands nothing."

"He says you're obsessed with women, so he understands that, at least. You watch some girl across the street, he says—"

"What if I do?"

"How can you give yourself to the Reconciliation if you're so distracted?"

"Are you trying to talk me out of wanting Judith?"

"I thought magic was a religion to you."

"So's she."

"A discipline, a sacred mystery."

"Again, so's she." He laughed. "When I first saw her, it was like my first glimpse of another world. I knew I'd risk my life to be inside her skin. When I'm with her, I feel like an adept again, creeping towards a miracle, step by step. Tentative, excited—"

"Enough!"

"Really? You don't want to know why I need to be inside her so badly?"

Godolphin eyed him ruefully. "Not really," he said. "But if you don't tell me, I'll only wonder."

"Because for a little time, I'll forget who I am. Everything petty and particular will go out of me. My ambition. My history. Everything. I'll be unmade. And that's when I'm closest to divinity."

"Somehow you always manage to bring everything back to that. Even your lust."

"It's all One."

"I don't like your talk of the One," Godolphin said.

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"You sound like Roxborough with his die turns! *Simplicity is strength* and all the rest."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. It's just that women are where everything begins, and I like—how shall I put it?—to touch the source as often as possible."

"You think you're perfect, don't you?" Godolphin said.

"Why so sour? A week ago you were doting on my every word."

"I don't like what we're doing," Godolphin replied. "I want Judith for myself."

"You'll have her. And so will I. That's the glory of this."

"There'll be no difference between them?"

"None. They'll be identical. To the pucker. To the lash."

"So why must I have the copy?"

"You know the answer to that. Because the original loves me, not you."

"I should never have let you set eyes on her."

"You couldn't have kept us apart. Don't look so forlorn. I'm going to make you a Judith that'll dote on you and your sons, and your son's sons, until the name Godolphin disappears off the face of the earth. Now where's the harm in that?"

As he asked the question all the candles but the one he held went out, and the past was extinguished with them. He was suddenly back in the empty house, a police siren whooping "nearby". He stepped back into the hallway as the car sped down Gamut Street, its blue light pulsing through the windows. Seconds later, another came howling after. Though the din of the sirens faded and finally disappeared, the flashes did not. They brightened from blue to white, however, and lost their regularity. By their brilliance he saw the house once more restored to glory. It was no longer a place of debate and laughter however. There was sobbing above and below, and the animal smells of fear in every corner. Thunder rattled the roof, but there was no rain to soothe its cholera.

I don't want to be here, he thought. The other memories had entertained him. He'd liked his role in the proceedings.

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But this darkness was another matter entirely. It was full of death, and he wanted to run from it.

The lightning came again, horribly livid. By it, he saw Lucius Cobbitt standing halfway up the stairs, clutching the banister as though he'd fall if he didn't. He'd bitten his tongue or lip, or both, and blood dribbled from his mouth and chin, made stringy by the spit with which it was mingled. When Gentle climbed the stairs he smelt excrement. The boy had loosed his bowels in his breeches. Seeing Gentle, he raised his eyes.

"How did it fail, Maestro?" he sobbed. "How?" Gentle shuddered as the question brought images flooding into his head, more horrendous than all the scenes he'd witnessed at the Erasure. The failure of the Reconciliation had been sudden, and calamitous, and had caught the Maestros representing the five Dominions at such a delicate time in the working that they'd been ill-equipped to prevent it. The spirits of all five had already risen from their circles across Imajica and, carrying the analogues of their worlds, had converged on the Ana, the zone of inviolability that appeared every two centuries in the heart of the In Ovo. There, for a tender time, miracles could be worked, as the Maestros, safe from the In Ovo's inhabitants but freed and empowered by their immaterial state, unburdened themselves of their similitudes and allowed the genius of the Ana to complete the fusing of the Dominions. It was a precarious time, but they'd been reaching its conclusion when the circle in which the Maestro Sartori's physical body sat, its stones protecting the outside world from the flux which led to the In Ovo, broke. Of all the potential places for failure in the ceremonies, this was the unlikeliest: tantamount to transubstantiation failing for want of salt in the bread. But fail it did, and once the breach was opened, there was no way to seal it until the Maestros had returned to their bodies and mustered their feits. In that time the hungry tenants of the In Ovo had free access to the Fifth. Not only to the Fifth, but to the exulted flesh of the Maestros themselves, who vacated the Ana in confusion, leading the hounds of the In Ovo back to their flesh.

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Sartori's life would certainly have been forfeited along with all the others had Pie 'oh' pah not intervened. When the circle broke, Pie was being forcibly removed from the Retreat on Godolphin's order, for voicing a prophetic murmur of alarm and disturbing the audience. The duty of removal had fallen to Abelove and Lucius Cobbitt, but neither had possessed the strength to hold the mystic. It had broken free, racing across the Retreat and plunging into the circle, where its master was visible to the assembly only as ablaze

of light. The mystif had learned well at Sartori's feet. It had defenses against the flux of power that roared in the circle and had pulled the Maestro from under the noses of the approaching Oviates.

The rest of the assembly, however, caught between the mystif's yells of warning and Roxborough's attempts to maintain the status quo, were still standing around in confusion when the Oviates appeared.

The entities were swift. One moment the Retreat was a bridge to the transcendental; the next, it was an abattoir. Dazed by his sudden fall from grace, the Maestro had seen only snatches of the massacre, but they were burned on his eyes, and Gentle remembered them now in all their wretched detail: Abelove, scrabbling at the ground in terror as an Oviate the size of a felled bull, but resembling something barely born, opened its toothless maw and drew him between its jaws with tongues the length of whips; McGann, losing his arm to a sleek dark animal that rippled as it ran but hauling himself away, his blood a scarlet fountain, while the thing was distracted by fresher meat; and Flores—poor Flores, who'd come to Gamut Street the day before, carrying a letter of introduction from Casanova—caught by two beasts whose skulls were as flat as spades and whose translucent skin had given Sartori a terrible glimpse of their victim's agony as his head was taken down the throat of one while his legs were devoured by the other.

But it was the death of Roxborough's sister that Gentle remembered with profoundest horror, not least because the man had been at such pains to keep her from coming and had even abased himself to the Maestro, begging him to talk

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to the woman and persuade her to stay away. He'd had the talk, but he'd knowingly made his caution a seduction—almost literally, in fact—and she'd come to see the Recon?ciliation as much to meet the eyes of the man who'd wooed her with his warnings as for the ceremony itself. She'd paid the most terrible price. She'd been fought over like a bone among hungry wolves, shrieking a prayer for deliverance as a trio of Oviates drew out her entrails and dabbled in her open skull. By the time the Maestro, with Pie 'oh' pah's help, had raised sufficient feits to drive the entities back into the circle, she was dying in her own coils, thrashing like a fish half filleted by a hook.

Only later did the Maestro hear of the atrocities visited on the other circles. It was the same story there as in the Fifth: the Oviates appearing in the midst of innocents; carnage ensuing, which was only brought to a halt when one of the Maestro's assistants drove them back. With the exception of Sartori, the Maestros themselves had all perished.

"It would be better if I'd died like the others," he said to Lucius.

The boy tried to persuade him otherwise, but tears overwhelmed him. There was another voice, however, rising from the bottom of the stairs, raw with grief but strong.

"Sartori! Sartori!"

He turned. Joshua was there in the hallway, his fine powder-blue coat covered with blood. As were his hands. As was his face.

"What's going to happen?" he yelled, "This storm! It's going to tear the world apart!"

"No, Joshua."

"Don't lie to me! There's never been a storm like this! Ever!"

"Control yourself—"

"Jesus Christ our Lord, forgive us our trespasses."

"That's not going to help, Joshua."

Godolphin had a crucifix in his hand and put it to his lips.

"You Godless trash! Are you a demon? Is that it? Were you sent to have our souls?" Tears were pouring down his crazed face. "What Hell did you come out of?"

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"The same as you. The human hell."

"I should have listened to Roxborough. He knew! He said over and over you had some plan, and I didn't believe him, wouldn't believe him, because Judith loved you, and how could anything so pure love anything unholy? But you hid yourself from her too, didn't you? Poor, sweet Judith! How did you make her love you? How did you do it?"

"Is that all you can think of?"

"Tell me! *How?*"

Barely coherent in his fury, Godolphin started up the stairs towards the seducer.

Gentle felt his hand go to his mouth. Godolphin halted. He knew this power.

"Haven't we shed enough blood tonight?" the Maestro said.

"You, not me," Godolphin replied. He jabbed a finger in Gentle's direction, the crucifix hanging from his fist. "You'll have no peace after this," he said. "Roxborough's already talking about a purge, and I'm going to give him every guinea he needs to break your back. You and all your works are damned!"

"Even Judith?"

"I never want to see that creature again."

"But she's yours, Joshua," the Maestro said flatly, descending the stairs as he spoke. "She's yours forever and ever. She won't age. She won't die. She belongs to the family Godolphin until the sun goes out."

"Then I'll kill her."

"And have her innocent soul on your blotched conscience?"

"She's got no soul!"

"I promised you Judith to the lash, and that's what she is. A religion. A discipline. A sacred mystery. Remember?"

Godolphin buried his face in his hands.

"She's the one truly innocent soul left among us, Joshua. Preserve her. Love her as you've never loved any living thing, because she's our only victory." He took hold of Godolphin's hands and unmasked him. "Don't be ashamed of our ambition," he said. "And don't believe anyone who

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tells you it was the Devil's doing. We did what we did out of love."

"Which?" Godolphin said. "Making her, or the Reconciliation?"

"It's all One," he replied. "Believe that, at least."

Godolphin claimed his hands from the Maestro's grip. "I'll never believe anything again," he said and, turning his back, began his weary descent.

Standing on the stairs, watching the memory disappear, Gentle said a second farewell. He had never seen Godolphin again after that night. A few weeks later the man had retreated to his estate and sealed himself up there, living in silent self-mortification until despair had burst his tender heart.

"It was my fault," said the boy on the stairs behind him.

Gentle had forgotten Lucius was still there, watching and listening. He turned back to the child.

"No," he said, "You're not to blame."

Lucius had wiped the blood from his chin, but he couldn't control his trembling. His teeth chattered between his stumbling words. "I did everything you told me to do," he said. "I swear. I swear. But I must have missed some words from the rites or... I don't know... maybe mixed up the stones."

"What are you talking about?"

"The stones you gave me, to replace the flawed ones."

"I gave you no stones, Lucius."

"But Maestro, you did. Two stones, to go in the circle. You told me to bury the ones I took, at the step. Don't you remember?"

Listening to the boy, Gentle finally understood how the Reconciliation had come to grief. His other—born in the upper room of this very house—had used Lucius as his agent, sending him to replace a part of the circle with stones that resembled the originals (forging ran in the blood), knowing they would not preserve the circle's integrity when the ceremony reached its height.

But while the man who was remembering these scenes understood how all this had come about, to Maestro Sar-

tori, still ignorant of the other self he'd created in the womb of the doubling circle, this remained an unfathomable mystery.

"I gave you no such instruction," he said to Lucius.

"I understand," the youth replied. "You have to lay the blame at my feet. That's why Maestros need adepts. I begged you for the responsibility, and I'm glad to have had it even if I failed." He reached into his pocket as he spoke. "Forgive me, Maestro," he said and, drawing out a knife, had it at his heart in the space of a thunderclap. As the tip drew blood the Maestro caught hold of the youth's hand, wrenching the blade from his fingers, threw it down the stairs.

"Who gave you permission to do that?" he said to Lucius. "I thought you wanted to be an adept?"

"I did," the boy said.

"And now you're out of love with it. You see humiliation and you want no more of the business."

"No!" Lucius protested. "I still want wisdom. But I failed tonight."

"We *all* failed tonight!" the Maestro said. He took hold of the trembling boy and spoke to him softly. "I don't know how this tragedy came about," he said. "But I sniff more than your shite in the air. Some plot was here, laid against high ambition, and perhaps if I hadn't been blinded by my own glory I'd have seen it. The fault isn't yours, Lucius. And stopping your own life won't bring Abelove, or Esther, or any of the others back. Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"Do you still want to be my adept?"

"Of course."

"Will you obey my instructions now, to the letter?"

"Anything. Just tell me what you need from me."

"Take my books, all that you can carry, and go as far from here as you're able to go. To the other end of the Imajica, if you can learn the trick of it. Somewhere Rox-borough and his hounds won't ever find you. There's a hard winter coming for men like us. It'll kill all but the cleverest. But you can be clever, can't you?"

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"Yes."

"I knew it." The Maestro smiled. "You must teach yourself in secret, Lucius, and you must learn to live outside time. That way, the years won't wither you, and when Rox-borough's dead you'll be able to try again."

"Where will you be, Maestro?"

"Forgotten, if I'm lucky. But never forgiven, I think. That would be too much to hope for. Don't look so dejected, Lucius. I have to know there's some hope, and I'm charging you to carry it for me."

"It's my honor, Maestro."

As he replied, Gentle was once again grazed by the dejavu he'd first felt when he'd encountered Lucius outside the dining room door. But the touch was light, and passed before he could make sense of it.

"Remember, Lucius, that everything you learn is already part of you, even to the Godhead Itself. Study nothing except in the knowledge that you already knew it. Worship nothing except in adoration of your true self. And fear nothing"—there the Maestro stopped and shuddered, although he had a presentiment—"fear nothing except in the certainty that you are your enemy's begetter and its only hope of healing. For everything that does evil is in pain. Will you remember those things?"

The boy looked uncertain. "As best I can," he said.

"That will have to suffice," the Maestro said. "Now ...get out of here before the purgers come."

He let go of the boy's shoulders, and Cobbitt retreated down the stairs, backwards, like a commoner from the king, only turning and heading away when he was at the bottom.

The storm was overhead now, and with the boy gone, taking his sewer stench with him, the smell of electricity was strong. The candle Gentle held flickered, and for an instant he thought it was going to be extinguished, signaling the end of these recollections, at least for tonight. But there was more to come.

"That was kind," he heard Pie 'oh' pah say, and turned to see the mystif standing at the top of the stairs. It had discarded its soiled clothes with its customary fastidiousness,

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but the plain shirt and trousers it wore were all the finery it needed to appear in perfection. There was no face in the Imajica more beautiful than this, Gentle thought, nor form more graceful, and the scenes of terror and recrimination the storm had brought were of little consequence while he bathed in the sight of it. But the Maestro he had been had not yet made the error of losing this-miracle and, seeing the mystif, was more concerned that his deceptions had been discovered.

"Were you here when Godolphin came?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know about Judith?"

"I can guess."

"I kept it from you because I knew you wouldn't approve."

"It's not my place to approve or otherwise. I'm not your wife, that you should fear my censure."

"Still, I do. And I thought, well, when the Reconciliation was done this would seem like a little indulgence, and you'd say I deserved it because of what I'd achieved. Now it seems like a crime, and I wish it could be undone."

"Do you? Truly?" the mystif said.

The Maestro looked up. "No, I don't," he said, his tone that of a man surprised by a revelation. He started to climb the stairs. "I suppose I must believe what I told Godolphin, about her being our..."

"Victory," Pie prompted, stepping aside to let the summoner step into the Meditation Room. It was, as ever, bare. "Shall I leave you alone?" Pie asked.

"No," the Maestro said hurriedly. Then, more quietly: "Please. No."

He went to the window from which he had stood those many evenings watching the nymph Allegra at her toilet. The branches of the tree he'd spied her through thrashed themselves to splinter and pulp against the panes.

"Can you make me forget, Pie 'oh' pah? There are such feits, aren't there?"

"Of course. But is that what you want?"

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"No, what I really want is death, but I'm too afraid of that at the moment. So ... it will have to be forgetfulness."

"The true Maestro folds pain into his experience."

"Then I'm not a true Maestro," he returned. "I don't have the courage for that. Make me forget, mystif. Divide me from what I've done and what I am forever. Make a feithat'll be a river between me and this moment, so that I'm never tempted to cross it."

"How will you live?"

The Maestro puzzled over this for a few moments. "In increments," he finally replied. "Each part ignorant of the part before. Well. You can do this for me?"

"Certainly."

"It's what I did for the woman I made for Godolphin. Every ten years she'll start to undo her life and disappear. Then she'll invent another one and live it, never knowing what she left behind."

Listening to himself plot the life he'd lived, Gentle heard a perverse satisfaction in his voice. He had condemned himself to two hundred years of waste, but he'd known what he was doing. He'd made the same arrangements precisely for the second Judith and had contemplated every consequence on her behalf. It wasn't just cowardice that made him shun these memories. It was a kind of revenge upon himself for failing, to banish his future to the same limbo he'd made for his creature.

"I'll have pleasure, Pie," he said. "I'll wander the world and enjoy the moments. I just won't have the sum of them."

"And what about me?"

"After this, you're free to go," he said.

"And do what? Be what?"

"Whore or assassin, I don't care," the Maestro said.

The remark had been thrown off casually—surely not intended as an order to the mystif. But was it a slave's duty to distinguish between a command made for the humor of it and one to be followed absolutely? No, it was a slave's duty to obey, especially if the dictate came, as did this, from a beloved mouth. Here, with a throwaway remark, the master

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had circumscribed his servant's life for two centuries, driving it to deeds it had doubtless abhorred.

Gentle saw the tears shining in the mystif's eyes and felt its suffering like a hammer pounding at his heart. He hated himself then, for his arrogance and his carelessness, for not seeing the harm he was doing a creature that only wanted to love him and be near him. And he longed more than ever to be reunited with Pie, so that he could beg forgiveness for this cruelty.

"Make me forget," he said again. "I want an end to this."

The mystif was speaking, Gentle saw, though whatever incantations its lips shaped were spoken in a voice he couldn't hear. The breath that bore them made the flame he'd set on the floor flicker, however, and as the mystif instructed its master in forgetfulness the memories went out with the flame.

Gentle rummaged for the box of matches and struck one, using its light to find the smoking wick, then reigniting it. But the night of storm had passed back into history, and Pie 'oh' pah, beautiful, obedient, loving Pie 'oh' pah, had gone with it. He sat down in front of the candle and waited, wondering if there was some coda to come. But the house was dead from cellar to eaves.

"So," he said to himself. "What now, Maestro?"

He had his answer from his stomach, which made a little thunder of its own.

"You want food?" he asked it, and it gurgled its reply. "Me too," he said.

He got up and started down the stairs, preparing himself for a return to modernity. As he reached the bottom, however, he heard something scraping across the bare boards. He raised the candle, and his voice.

"Who's there?"

Neither the light nor his demand brought an answer. But the sound went on, and others joined it, none of them pleasant: a low, agonized moan; a wet, dragging sound; a whistling inhalation. What melodrama was his memory preparing to stage for him, he wondered, that had need of these hoary devices? They might have inspired fear in him

once upon a time, but not now. He'd seen too many horrors face to face to be chilled by imitations.

"What's this about?" he asked the shadows, and was somewhat surprised to have his question answered.

"We've waited for you a long time," a wheezing voice told him.

"Sometimes we thought you'd never come home," another said. There was a fluting femininity in its tone.

Gentle took a step in the direction of the woman, and the rim of the candle's reach touched what looked to be the hem of a scarlet skirt, which was hastily twitched out of sight. Where it had lain, the bare boards shone with fresh blood. He didn't advance any further, but listened for another pronouncement from the shadows. It came soon enough. Not the woman this time, but the wheezer.

"The fault was yours," he said. "But the pain's been ours. All these years, waiting for you."

Though corrupted by anguish, the voice was familiar. He'd heard its lilt in this very house.

"Is that Abelove?" he said.

"Do you remember the maggot-pie?" the man said, confirming his identity. "The number of times I've thought: That was my error, bringing the bird into the house. Tyr-whitt would have no part of it, and he survived, didn't he? He died in his dotage. And Roxborough, and Godolphin, and you. All of you lived and died intact. But me, I just suffered here, flying against the glass but never hard enough to cease." He moaned, and though his rebuke was as absurd as it had been when first uttered, this time Gentle shuddered. "I'm not alone, of course," Abelove said. "Esther's here. And Flores. And Byam-Shaw. And Bloxham's brother-in-law; do you remember him? So there'll be plenty of company for you."

"I'm not staying," Gentle said.

"Oh, but you are," said Esther. "It's the least you can do."

"Blow out the candle," Abelove said. "Save yourself the distress of seeing us. We'll put out your eyes, and you can live with us blind."

"I'll do no such thing," Gentle said, raising the light so that it cast its net wider.

They appeared at its farthest edge, their viscera catching the gleam. What he'd taken to be Esther's skirt was a train of tissue, half flayed from her hip and thigh. She clutched it still, pulling it up around her, seeking to conceal her groin from him. Her decorum was absurd, but then perhaps his reputation as a womanizer had so swelled over the passage of the years that she believed he might be aroused by her, even in this appalling state. There was worse, however. Byam-Shaw was barely recognizable as a human being, and Bloxham's brother-in-law looked to have been chewed by tigers. But whatever their condition they were ready for revenge, no doubt of that. At Abelove's command they began to close upon him.

"You've already been hurt enough," Gentle said. "I don't want to hurt you again. I advise you to let me pass."

"Let you pass to do what?" Abelove replied, his terriblewounding clearer with every step he took. His scalp had gone, and one of his eyes lolled on his cheek. When he lifted his arm to point his next accusation at Gentle, it was with the littlest finger, which was the only one remaining on that hand. "You want to try again, don't you? Don't deny it! You've got the old ambition in your head!"

"You died for the Reconciliation," Gentle said. "Don't you want to see it achieved?"

"It's an abomination!" Abelove replied. "It was never meant to be! We died proving that. You render our sacrifice worthless if you try, then fail again."

"I won't fail," Gentle said.

"No, you won't," Esther replied, dropping her skirt to uncoil a garrote of her gut. "Because you won't get the chance."

He looked from one wretched face to the next and realized that he didn't have a hope of dissuading them from their intentions. They hadn't waited out the years to be diverted by argument. They'd waited for revenge. He had no choice but to stop them with a pneuma, regrettable as it was to add to their sum of suffering. He passed the candle from

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his right hand to his left, but as he did so somebody reached around him from behind and pinned his arms to his torso. The candle went from his fingers and rolled across the floor in the direction of his accusers. Before it could drown in its own wax, Abelove picked it up in his fingered hand.

"Good work, Flores," Abelove said.

The man clutching Gentle grunted his acknowledgment, shaking his prey to prove he had it securely caught. His arms were flayed, but they held Gentle like steel bands.

Abelove made something like a smile, though on a face with flaps for cheeks and blisters for lips it was a misbegotten thing.

"You don't struggle," he said, approaching Gentle with the candle held high. "Why's that? Are you already resigned to joining us, or do you think we'll be moved by your martyrdom and let you go?" He was very close to Gentle now. "It is pretty," he said. He cocked his eye a little, sighing. "How your face was loved!" he went on. "And this chest. How women fought to lay their heads upon it!" He slid his stump of a hand into Gentle's shirt and tore it open. "Very pale! And hairless! It's not Italian flesh, is it?"

"Does it matter?" said Esther. "As long as it bleeds, what do you care?"

"He never deigned to tell us anything about himself. We had to take him on trust because he had power in his fingers and his wits. He's like a little God, Tyrwhitt used to say. But even little Gods have fathers and mothers." Abelove leaned closer, allowing the candle flame within singing distance of Gentle's lashes. "Who are you *really*?" Abelove said. "You're not an Italian. Are you Dutch? You could be Dutch. Or a Swiss. Chilly and precise. Huh? Is that you?" He paused. Then: "Or are you the Devil's child?"

"Abelove," Esther protested.

"I want to know!" Abelove yelled. "I want to hear him admit he's Lucifer's son." He peered at Gentle more closely. "Go on," he said. "Confess it."

"I'm not," Gentle said.

"There was no Maestro in Christendom could match you

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for feits. That kind of power has to come from somebody. *Who*, Sartori?"

Gentle would have gladly told, if he'd had an answer. But he had none. "Whoever I am," he said, "and whatever hurt I've done—"

" 'Whatever,' he says!" Esther spat. "Listen to him! Whatever! Whatever!"

She pushed Abelove aside and tossed a loop of her gut over Gentle's head. Abelove protested, but he'd prevaricated long enough. He was howled down from all sides, Esther's howls the loudest. Tightening the noose around Gentle's neck, she tugged on it, preparing to topple him. He felt rather than saw the devourers awaiting him when he fell. Something was gnawing at his leg, something else punching his testicles. It hurt like hell, and he started to struggle and kick. There were too many holds upon him, however—gut, arms, and teeth—and he earned himself not an inch of latitude with his thrashings. Past the red blur of Esther's fury, he caught sight of Abelove, crossing himself with his one-fingered hand, then raising the candle to his mouth.

"Don't!" Gentle yelled. Even a little light was better than none. Hearing him shout, Abelove looked up and shrugged. Then he blew out the flame. Gentle felt the wet flesh around him rise like a tide to claw him down. The fist gave up beating at his testicles and seized them instead. He screamed with pain, his clamor rising an octave as someone began to chew on his hamstrings.

"Down!" he heard Esther screech. "Down!"

Her noose had cut off all but the last squeak of breath. Choked, crushed, and devoured, he toppled, his head thrown back as he did so. They'd take his eyes, he knew, as soon as they could, and that would be the end of him. Even if he was saved by some miracle, it would be worthless if they'd taken his eyes. Unmanned, he could go on living; but not blind. His knees struck the boards, and fingers clawed for access to his face. Knowing he had mere seconds of sight left to him, he opened his eyes as wide as he could and stared up into the darkness overhead, hoping to find some

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last lovely thing to spend them on: a beam of dusty moonlight; a spider's web, trembling at the din he raised. But the darkness was too deep. His eyes would be thumbed out before he could use them again.

And then, a motion in that darkness. Something unfurling, like smoke from a conch, taking figmental shape overhead. His pain's invention, no doubt, but it sweetened his terror a little to see a face, like that of a beatific child, pour his gaze upon him.

"Open yourself to me," he heard it say. "Give up the struggle and let me be in you."

More cliché, he thought. A dream of intercession to set against the nightmare that was about to geld and blind him. But one was real—his pain was testament to that—so why not the other?

"Let me into your head and heart," the infant's lips said.

"I don't know how," he yelled, his cry taken up in parody by Abelove and the rest.

"How? How? How?" they chanted.

The child had its reply. "Give up the fight," he said.

That wasn't so hard, Gentle thought. He'd lost it anyway. What was there left to lose? With his eyes fixed on the child, Gentle let every muscle in his body relax. His hands gave up their fists; his heels, their kicks. His head tipped back, mouth open.

"Open your heart and head," he heard the infant say.

"Yes," he replied.

Even as he uttered his invitation, a moth's-wing doubt fluttered in his ear. At the beginning hadn't this smacked of melodrama? And didn't it still? A soul snatched from Purgatory by cherubim; opened, at the last, to simple salvation. But his heart was wide, and the saving child swooped upon it before doubt could seal it again. He tasted another mind in his throat and felt its chill in his veins. The invader was as good as its word. He felt his tormentors melt from around him, their holds and howls fading like mists.

He fell to the floor. It was dry beneath his cheek, though seconds before Esther's skirts had been seeping on it. Nor was there any trace of the creatures' stench in the air. He

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rolled over and cautiously reached to touch his hamstrings. They were intact. And his testicles, which he'd presumed nearly pulped, didn't even ache. He laughed with relief to find himself whole and, while he laughed, scabbled for the candle he'd dropped. Delusion! It had all been delusion! Some final rite of passage conducted by his mind so that he might supersede his guilt and face his future as a Reconciler unburdened. Well, the phantoms had done their duty. Now he was free.

His fingers had found the candle. He picked it up, fumbled for the matches, struck one, and put the flame to the wick. The stage he'd filled with ghouls and cherubim was empty from boards to gallery. He got to his feet. Though the hurts he'd felt had been imagined, the fight he'd put up against them had been real enough, and his body—which was far from healed after the brutalities of Yzordderex—was the worse for his resistance.

As he hobbled towards the door, he heard the cherub speak again. "Alone at last," it said.

He turned on his heel. The voice had come from behind him, but the staircase was empty. So was the landing and the passageways that led off the hall. The voice came again, however.

"Amazing, isn't it?" the putto said. "To hear and not to see. It's enough to drive a man mad."

Again Gentle wheeled, the candle flame fluttering at his speed.

"I'm still here," the cherub said. "We'll be together for quite a time, just you and I, so we'd better get to like each other. What do you enjoy chatting about? Politics? Food? I'm good for anything but religion."

This time, as he turned, Gentle caught a glimpse of his tormentor. It had put off the cherubic illusion. What he saw resembled a small ape, its face either anemic or powdered, its eyes black beads, its mouth enormous. Rather than waste his energies pursuing something so nimble (it had hung from the ceiling minutes before), Gentle stood still and waited. The tormentor was a chatterbox. It would

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speak again and eventually show itself entirely. He didn't have to wait long.

"Those demons of yours must have been appalling," it said, "The way you kicked and cursed."

"You didn't see them?"

"No. Nor do I want to."

"But you've got your fingers in my head, haven't you?"

"Yes, But* don't delve. It's not my business."

"What *is* your business?"

"How do you live in this brain? It's so small and sweaty."

"Your business?"

"To keep you company."

"I'm leaving soon."

"I don't think so. Of course, that's just my opinion...."

"Who are you?"

"Call me Little Ease."

"That's a name?"

"My father was a jailer. Little Ease was his favorite cell. I used to say, Thank God he didn't circumcise for a living, or I'd be—"

"Don't."

"Just trying to keep the conversation light. You seem very agitated. There's no need. You're not going to come to any harm, unless you defy my Maestro."

"Sartori."

"The very man. He knew you'd come here, you see. He said you'd pine and you'd preen, and how very right he was. But then I'm sure he'd have done the same thing. There's nothing in your head that isn't in his. Except for me, that is. I must thank you for being so prompt, by the way. He said I'd have to be patient, but here you are, after less than twodays. You must have wanted these memories badly."

The creature went on in similar vein, burbling at the back of Gentle's head, but he was barely aware of it. He was concentrating on what to do now. This creature, whatever it was, had tricked its way into him—*Open your head and heart*, it had said, and he'd done just that, fool that he was: opened himself up to its possession—and now he had to find some way to be rid of it.

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"There's more where those came from, you know," it was saying.

He'd temporarily lost track of its monologue and didn't know what it was prattling about.

"More of what?" he said.

"More memories," it replied. "You wanted the past, but you've only had a tiny part of a tiny part. The best's still to come."

"I don't want it," he said.

"Why not? It's *you*, Maestro, in all your many skins. You should have what's yours. Or are you afraid you'll drown in what you've been?"

He didn't answer. It knew damn well how much damage the past could do if it came over him too suddenly; he'd laid plans for that very eventuality as he'd come to the house.

Little Ease must have heard his pulse quicken, because it said, "I can see why it'd frighten you. There's so much to be guilty for, isn't there? Always, so much."

He had to be out and away, he thought. Staying here, where the past was all too present, invited disaster.

"Where are you going?" Little Ease said as Gentle started towards the door.

"I'd like to get some sleep," he said. An innocent enough request.

"You can sleep here," his possessor replied.

"There's no bed."

"Then lie down on the floor. I'll sing a lullaby."

"And there's nothing to eat or drink."

"You don't need sustenance right now," came the reply.

"I'm hungry."

"So fast for a while."

Why was it so eager to keep him here? he wondered. Did it simply want to wear him down with sleeplessness and thirst before he even stepped outside? Or did its sphere of influence cease at the threshold? That hope leapt in him, but he tried not to let it show. He sensed that the creature, though it had spoken of entering his head and heart, did not have access to every thought in his cranium. If it did, it'd have no need of threats in order to keep him here. It would

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simply direct his limbs to be leaden and drop him to the ground. His intentions were still his own, even if the entity had his memories at its behest, and it followed therefore that he might get to the door, if he was quick, and be beyond its grasp before it opened the floodgates. In order to placate it until he was ready to make his move, he turned his back on the door.

"Then I suppose I stay," he said.

"At least we've got each other for company," Little Ease said. "Though let me make it clear, I draw the line at any carnal relations, however desperate you get. Please don't take it personally. It's just that I know your reputation, and I want to state here and now I have no interest in sex."

"Will you never have children?"

"Oh, yes, but that's different. I lay them in the heads of my enemies."

"Is that a warning?" he asked.

"Not at all," it replied. "I'm sure you could accommodate a family of us. It's all One, after all. Isn't that right?" It left off its voice for a moment and imitated him perfectly. "We'll not be subsumed at our deaths, Roxborough, we'll be increased to the size of Creation. Think of me as a little sign of that increase, and we'll get along fine."

"Until you murder me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because Sartori wants me dead."

"You do him an injustice," Little Ease said. "I've no brief as an assassin. All he wants me to do is keep you from your work until after midsummer. He doesn't want you playing the Reconciler and letting his enemies into the Fifth. Who can blame him? He intends to build a New Yzordderrex here, to rule over the Fifth from pole to pole. Did you know that?"

"He did mention it."

"And when that's done, I'm sure he'll embrace you as a brother."

"But until then—"

"—I have his permission to do whatever I must to keep

you from being a Reconciler. And if that means driving you insane with memories—"

"—then you will."

"Must, Maestro, *must*. I'm a dutiful creature."

Keep talking, Gentle thought, as if waxed poetic describing its powers of subservience. He wouldn't make for the door, he'd decided. It was probably double- or treble-locked. Better that he went for the window by which he'd entered. He'd fling himself through if need be. If he broke a few bones in the process, it'd be a small price to pay for escape.

He glanced around casually, as if deciding where he was going to lay his head, never once allowing his eyes to stray to the front door. The room with the open window lay ten paces at most from where he stood. Once inside, there'd be another ten to reach the window. Little Ease, meanwhile, was lost in loops of its own humility. Now was as good a time as any.

He took a pace towards the bottom of the stairs as a feint, then changed direction and darted for the door. He'd made three paces before it even realized what he was up to.

"Don't be so stupid!" it snapped.

He'd been conservative in his calculation, he realized. He'd be through the door in eight paces, not ten, and across the room in another six.

"I'm warning you," it shrieked, then, realizing its appeals would gain it nothing, acted.

Within a pace of the door, Gentle felt something open in his head. The crack through which he allowed the past to trickle suddenly gaped. In a pace the rivulet was a stream; in two, white waters; in three, a flood. He saw the window across the room, and the street outside, but his will to reach it was washed away in the deluge of the past.

He'd lived nineteen lives between his years as Sartori and his time as John Furie Zacharias, his unconscious programmed by Pie to ease him out of one life and into another in a fog of self-ignorance that only lifted when the deed was done, and he awoke in a strange city, with a name filched from a telephone book or a conversation. He'd left pain be-

hind him, of course, wherever he'd gone. Though he'd always been careful to detach himself from his circle, and cover his tracks when he departed, his sudden disappearances had undoubtedly caused great grief to everyone who'd held him in their affections. The only one who'd escaped unscathed had been himself. Until now. Now all these lives were upon him at once, and the hurts he'd scrupulously avoided caught up with him. His head filled with fragments of his past, pieces of the nineteen unfinished stories that he'd left behind, all lived with the same infantile greed for sensation that had marked his existence as John Furie Zacharias. In every one of these lives he'd had the comfort of adoration. He'd been loved and lionized: for his charm, for his profile, for his mystery. But that fact didn't sweeten the flood of memories.

Nor did it save him from the panic he felt as the little self he knew and understood was overwhelmed by the sheer profusion of details that arose from the other histories.

For two centuries he'd never had to ask the questions that vexed every other soul at some midnight or other: "Who am I? What was I made for, and what will I be when I die?"

Now he had too many answers, and that was more distressing than too few. He had a small tribe of selves, put on and off like masks. He had trivial purposes aplenty. But there had never been enough years held in his memory at one time to make him plumb the depths of regret or remorse, and he was the poorer for that. Nor, of course, had there been the imminence of death or the hard wisdom of mourning. Forgetfulness had always been on hand to smooth his frowns away, and it had left his spirit unproved.

Just as he'd feared, the assault of sights and scenes was too much to bear, and though he fought to hold on to some sense of the man he'd been when he'd entered the house, it was rapidly subsumed. Halfway between the door and the window his desire to escape, which had been rooted in the need to protect himself, went out of him. The determination fell from his face, as though it were just another mask. Nothing replaced it. He stood in the middle of the room like

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a stoic sentinel, with no flicker of his inner turmoil rising to disturb the placid symmetry of his face.

The night hours crawled on, marked by a bell in a distant steeple, but if he heard it he showed no sign. It wasn't until the first light of day crept over Gamut Street, slipping through the window he'd been so desperate to reach, that the world outside his confounded head drew any response from him. He wept. Not for himself, but rather for the delicacy of this amber light falling in soft pools on the hard floor. Seeing it, he conceived the vague notion of stepping out into the street and looking for the source of this miracle, but there was somebody in his head, its voice stronger than the muck of confusion that swilled there, who wanted him to answer a question before it would allow him out to play. It was a simple enough inquiry.

"Who are you?" it wanted to know.

The answer was difficult. He had a lot of names in his head, and pieces of lives to go with them, but which one of them was his? He'd have to sort through many fragments to get a sense of himself, and that was too wretched a task on a day like this, when there were sunbeams at the window, inviting him out to spy their father in Heaven.

"Who are you?" the voice asked him again, and he was obliged to tell the simple truth.

"I don't know."

The questioner seemed content with this. "You may as well go, then," it said. "But I'd like you to come back once in a while, just to see me. Will you do that?"

He said that of course he would, and the voice replied that he was free to go. His legs were stiff, and when he tried to walk he fell instead, and had to crawl to where the sun was brightening the boards. He played there for a time and then, feeling stronger, climbed out of the window into the street.

Had he possessed a cogent memory of the previous night's pursuits he'd have realized, as he jumped

down onto the pavement, that his guess concerning Sartori's agent had been correct, and its jurisdiction did indeed halt at the limits

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of the house. But he comprehended not at all the fact of his escape. He'd entered number 28 the previous night as a man of purpose, the Reconciler of the Imajica come to confront the past and be strengthened by self-knowledge. He left it undone by that same knowledge and stood in the street like a bedlamite, staring up at the sun in ignorance of the fact that its arc marked the year's progression to mid-summer, and thus to the hour when the man of purpose he'd been had to act—or fail forever.

2

I

Although Jude had not slept well after Clem's visit (dreams of light bulbs, talking in a code of flickers she couldn't crack), she woke early and had laid her plans for the day by eight. She'd drive up to Highgate, she decided, and try and find some way into the prison beneath the tower, where the only woman left in the Fifth who might help empower her languished. She knew more about Celestine now than she had when she'd first visited the tower on New Year's Eve. Dowd had procured her for the Unbeheld, or so he claimed, plucking her from the streets of London and taking her to the borders of the First. That she'd survived such traumas at all was extraordinary. That she might be sane at the end of them, after divine violation and centuries of imprisonment, was almost certainly too much to hope for. But mad or not, Celestine was a much needed source of insight, and Jude was determined to dare whatever she had to in order to hear the woman speak.

The tower was so perfectly anonymous she drove past it before realizing that she'd done so. Doubling back, she parked in a side street and approached on foot. There were no vehicles in the forecourt and no sign of life at any of the windows, but she marched to the front door and rang the bell, hoping there might be a caretaker she could persuade

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to let her in. She'd use Oscar's name as a reference, she decided. Though she knew this was playing with fire, there was no time for niceties. Whether Gentle's ambitions as a Reconciler were realized or not, the days ahead would be charged with possibilities. Things sealed were cracking; things silent were drawing breath to speak.

The door remained closed, though she rang and rapped several times. Frustrated, she headed around the back of the building, the route more choked by barbs and stings than ever. The tower's shadow chilled the ground where Clara had dropped and died, and the earth, which was badly drained, smelled of stagnancy. Until she walked here the thought of finding any fragments of the blue eye had not occurred to her, but perhaps it had been part of her unconscious agenda from the start. Finding no hope of access on this side of the building, she turned her attention to seeking the pieces. Though her recollections of what had happened here were strong, she couldn't pinpoint with any accuracy the place where Dowd's mites had devoured the stone, and she wandered around for fully an hour, searching through the long grass for some sign. Her patience was finally rewarded, however. Much farther from the tower than she'd ever have guessed, she found what the devourers had left. It was little more than a pebble, which anybody but herself would have passed over. But to her eyes its blue was unmistakable, and when she knelt to pick it up she was almost reverential. It looked like an egg, she thought, lying there in a nest of grass, waiting for

the warmth of a body to kindle the life in it.

As she stood up she heard the sound of car doors slamming on the other side of the building. Keeping the stone in her hand she slipped back down the side of the tower. There were voices in the forecourt: men and women exchanging words of welcome. At the corner, she had a glimpse of them. Here they were, the Tabula Rasa. In her imagination she'd elevated them to the dubious status of Grand Inquisitors, austere and merciless judges whose cruelty would be gouged into their faces. There was perhaps one among this quartet—the eldest of the three men—who would not have

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looked absurd in robes, but the others had an insipidity about their features and a sloth in their bearing that would have made them bathetic in any garb but the most bland. None looked particularly happy with his lot. To judge by their leaden eyes, sleep had failed to befriend them lately. Nor could their expensive clothes (everything charcoal and black) conceal the lethargy in their limbs.

She waited at the corner until they'd disappeared through the front door, hoping the last had left it ajar. But it was once again locked, and this time she declined to knock. While she might have brazened or flattered her way past a caretaker, none of the quartet she'd seen would have spared her an inch. As she stepped away from the door another car turned off the road and glided into the forecourt. Its driver was a male, and the youngest of the arrivees. It was too late to dodge for cover, so she raised her hand in a cheery way and picked up her pace to a smart trot.

As she came abreast of the vehicle it halted. She kept on walking. Once past it, she heard the car door open and a fruity, overeducated voice said, "You there! What are you doing?"

She kept up her trot, resisting the temptation to run even though she heard his feet on the gravel, then another haughty holler as he came in pursuit. She ignored him until she was at the property line and he was within grasping distance of her. Then she turned, with a pretty smile, and said, "Did you call?"

"This is a private ground," he replied.

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong address. You're not a gynecologist, are you?" Where this invention sprang from she didn't know, but it colored his cheeks in two pulses. "I need to see a doctor as soon as possible."

He shook his head, covered in confusion. "This isn't the hospital," he spluttered. "It's halfway down the hill."

Lord bless the English male, she thought, who could be reduced to near idiocy at the very mention of matters vaginal.

"Are you sure you're not a doctor?" she said, enjoying his discomfort. "Even a student? I don't mind."

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He actually took a step back from her at this, as though she was going to pounce on him and demand an examination on the spot.

"No, I'm—I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said, extending her hand. He was too baffled to refuse, and shook it. "I'm Sister Concupiscentia," she said.

"Bloxham," he replied.

"You should be a gynecologist," she said appreciatively. "You've got lovely warm hands." And with that she left him to his blushes.

2

There was a message from Chester Klein on the answering machine when she got back, inviting her to a cocktail party at his house that evening, in celebration of what he called the Bastard Boy's return to the land of the living. She was at first startled that Gentle had decided to make contact with his friends after all his talk of invisibility, then flattered that he'd taken her advice. Perhaps she'd been over-hasty in her rejection of him. Even *in* the short time she'd spent in Yzordderrex, the city had made her think and behave in ways she'd never have countenanced in the Fifth. How much more so for Gentle, whose catalogue of adventures in the Dominions would have filled a dozen diaries. Now he was back in the Fifth, perhaps he was resisting some of those bizarrer influences, like a man returned to civilization from some lost tribe, sluicing off the war paint and learning to wear shoes again. She called Klein back and accepted the invitation.

"My dear child, you are a sight for sore eyes," he said when she appeared on his doorstep that evening. "So stylishly un-nourished! Malnutrition a la mode. Perfection."

She hadn't seen him in a long time, but she didn't remember his ever being so fulsome in his flattery before. He kissed her on both cheeks and led her through the house into the back garden. There was still warmth in the descend-

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ing sun, and his other guests—two of whom she knew, two of whom were strangers—were sipping cocktails on the lawn. Though small and high-walled, the garden was almost tropically lush. Inevitably, given Klein's nature, it was entirely given over to flowering species, no bush or plant welcomed if it didn't bloom with immoderate abandon. He introduced her to the company one by one, starting with Vanessa, whose face—though much changed since they'd last met—was one of the two she knew. She had put on a good deal of weight and even more makeup, as though to cover one excess with another. Her eyes, Jude saw when she said hello, were those of a woman who was only holding back a scream for decorum's sake.

"Is Gentle with you?" was Vanessa's first question. "No, he's not," Klein said. "Now have another drink and go and dally in the rosebushes."

The woman took no offense at his condescension but made straight for the champagne bottle, while Klein introduced Jude to the two strangers in the party. One, a balding young man in sunglasses, he introduced as Duncan Skeet.

"A painter," he said. "Or, more precisely, an impressionist. Isn't that right, Duncan? You do impressions, don't you? Modigliani, Corot, Gauguin...."

The joke was lost on its butt, though not on Jude. "Isn't that illegal?" she said.

"Only if you don't talk about it," Klein replied, which remark brought a guffaw from the fellow in conversation with the faker, a heavily mustached and accented individual called Luis.

"Who's not a painter of any persuasion. You're not any?thing at all, are you, Luis?"

"How about a Lotos-eater?" Luis said. The scent Jude had taken to be that of the blossoms in the borders was in fact Luis' aftershave.

"I'll drink to that," Klein said, moving Jude on to the last of the company. Though Jude knew the woman's face she couldn't place it, until Klein named her—Simone—and she remembered the conversation she'd had at Clem and Tay-lor's, which had ended with this woman heading off in

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search of seduction. Klein left them to talk while he went inside to break open another bottle of champagne.

"We met at Christmas," Simone said. "I don't know if you remember?"

"Instantly," Jude said.

"I've had my hair chopped since then, and I swear half my friends don't recognize me."

"It suits you."

"Klein says I should have kept it and had it made into jewelry. Apparently hair brooches were the height of fashion at the turn of the century."

"Only as memento mori," Jude said. Simone looked blank. "The hair was usually from someone who'd died."

The woman's fizz-addled features still took a little time to register what she was being told, but when she grasped the point she let out a groan of disgust.

"I suppose that's his idea of a joke," she said. "He has no sense of fucking decency, that man." Klein was appearing from the back door, bearing champagne. "Yes, you!" Simone said. "Don't you take death seriously?"

"Have I missed something?" Klein said.

"You are a tasteless old fart sometimes!" Simone went on, striding toward him and throwing the glass down at his feet.

"What did I do?" Klein said.

Luis went to his assistance, cooing at Simone to calm her. Jude had no desire to get further embroiled. She retreated down one of the paths, her hand slipping into the deep pocket of her skirt, where the egg of the blue eye was lying. She closed her palm around it and stooped to sniff at one of the perfect roses. It had no scent, not even of life. She thumbed its petals. They were dry. She stood up again, casting her

eyes over the spectacle of blossoms. Fake, every last one.

Simone's caterwauling had ceased behind her, and now so did Luis' chatter. Jude looked around, and there at the back door, stepping out of the house into the warm evening light, was Gentle.

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"Save me," she heard Klein imploring. "Before I'm flayed alive,"

Gentle smiled his sun-shamer and opened his arms to Klein.

"No more arguments," he said, hugging the man. "Tell Simone," Klein replied. "Simone. Are you bullying Chester?" "He was being a bastard."

"No, I'm the bastard. Give me a kiss, and tell me you forgive him."

"I forgive him."

"Peace on earth, goodwill to Chester."

There was laughter from all parties, and Gentle passed through the company with kisses, hugs, and handshakes, re-serving the longest, and perhaps the crudest, embrace for Vanessa.

"You're missing somebody," Klein said, and steered Gentle's glance towards Jude.

He didn't lavish his smile upon her. She was wise to his devices, and he knew it. Instead he offered her an almost apologetic look and raised the glass Klein had already put in his hand in her direction. He'd always been a slick trans-former (perhaps it was the Maestro in him, surfacing as a trivial skill), and in the twenty-four hours or so since she'd left him on his doorstep he'd made himself new. The ragged locks were trimmed, the grimy face washed and shaved. Dressed in white, he looked like a cricketer returned from the crease, glowing with vigor and victory. She stared at him, searching for some sign of the haunted man he'd been the evening before, but he'd put his anxieties entirely out of sight, for which she could only admire him. More than admire. Tonight he was the lover she'd imagined as she'd lain in Quai-soir's bed, and she couldn't help but be stirred by the sight of him. Once before a dream had led her into his arms, and the consequence, of course, had been pain and tears. It was a form of masochism to invite a repeat of that experience, and a distraction from weightier matters.

And yet; and yet. Was it perhaps *inevitable* that they found their way back into one another's arms sooner or

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later? And if it was, maybe this game of glances was a greater distraction still, and they would serve their ambitions better to dispense with the dalliance and accept that they were indivisible. This time, instead of being dogged by a past neither of them had comprehended, they knew their histories and could build on solid ground. That is, if he had the will to do so.

Klein was beckoning her, but she stayed in her bower of fake blossoms, seeing how eager he was to watch the drama he'd engineered unfold. He, Luis, and Duncan were merely spectators. The scene they'd come to watch was the Judgment of Paris, with Vanessa, Simone, and herself cast as the Goddesses,

and Gentle as the hero obliged to choose between them. It was grotesque, and she was determined to keep herself from the tableau, instead wandering up to the far end of the garden while the banter continued on the lawn. Close to the wall she came upon a strange sight. A clearing had been made in the artificial jungle, and a small rosebush—real, but far less sumptuous than the fakery surrounding it—had been planted there. As she was puzzling over this, Luis appeared at her side with a glass of champagne.

"One of his cats," Luis said. "Gloriana. She was killed by a car in March. He was devastated. Couldn't sleep. Wouldn't even talk to anybody. I thought he was going to kill himself."

"He's a strange one," Jude said, casting a glance back at Klein, who had his arm around Gentle's shoulder and was laughing uproariously. "He pretends everything's a game—"

"That's because he feels everything too much," Luis replied.

"I doubt that," she said.

"I've been in business with him twenty-one, twenty-two years. We have fights. We make up. We have fights again. He's a good man, believe me. But so afraid of feeling, he must make it all a joke. You're not English, huh?"

"No, I'm English."

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"Then you understand this," he said. "You also have the little graves, hidden away." He laughed.

"Thousands," she said, watching Gentle step back into the house. "Would you excuse me a moment?" she said, and headed back down the garden with Luis in pursuit.

Klein made a move to intercept her, but she simply handed him her empty glass and went inside. Gentle was in the kitchen, rooting through the refrigerator, peeling the lids off bowls and peering into them.

"So much for invisibility," Jude said.

"Would you have preferred it if I hadn't come?"

"Meaning that if I'd asked you'd have stayed away?"

He grinned as he found something that suited his palate. "Meaning," he said, "that the rest of them don't have a prayer. I came because I knew you'd be here."

He plunged his first and middle fingers into the ramekin he'd brought out and laid a dollop of chocolate mousse on his tongue.

"Want some?" he said.

She hadn't, until she saw the abandon with which he was devouring the stuff. His appetite was contagious. She scooped a fingerful herself. It was sweet and creamy.

"Good?" he said.

"Sinful," she replied. "What made you change your mind?"

"About what?"

"About hiding yourself away."

"Life's too short," he said, taking his laden fingers to his mouth again. "Besides, I just said: I knew you'd be here."

"You're a mind reader now?"

"I'm flourishing," he said, his grin more chocolate than teeth. The sophisticate she'd seen step out into the garden minutes before was here a guzzling boy.

"You've got chocolate all around your mouth," she said.

"Do you want to kiss it off?" he replied.

"Yes," she said, seeing no purpose misrepresenting her feeling. Secrets had done them too much harm in the past.

"Then why are we still here?" he said.

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"Klein'll never forgive us if we leave. The party's in your honor."

"They can talk about us when we've gone," he said, setting down the ramekin and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "In fact, they'd probably prefer that. I say we go now, before we're spotted. We're wasting time making conversation—"

"—when we could be making love."

"I thought / was the mind reader," he said.

As they opened the front door they heard Klein calling them from the back, and Jude felt a pang of guilt, until she remembered the proprietorial look she'd caught on Klein's face when Gentle had first appeared and he'd known that he had the cast gathered for a fine farce. Guilt turned to irritation, and she slammed the front door hard to make sure he heard.

3

As soon as they got back to the flat Jude threw open the windows to let the breeze, which was still balmy though the night had long since fallen, come and go. News from the streets outside came with it, of course, but nothing momentous: the inevitable sirens; chatter from the pavement; jazz from the club down the block. With the windows wide, she sat down on the bed beside Gentle. It was time for them to speak without any other agenda but the truth.

"I didn't think we'd end up this way," she said. "Here. Together."

"Are you glad we have?"

"Yes, I'm glad," she said, after a pause. "It feels right."

"Good," he replied. "It feels perfectly natural to metoo."

He slid around the back of her and, threading his hand through her hair, began to work his fingers against her scalp. She sighed.

"You like that?" he asked.

"I like that."

"Do you want to tell me how you feel?"

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"About what?"

"About me. About us."

"I told you, it feels right."

"That's all?"

"No."

"What else?"

She closed her eyes, the persuasive fingers almost easing the words out of her. "I'm glad you're here because I think we can learn from one another. Maybe even love each other again. How does that sound?"

"Fine by me," he said softly.

"And what about you? What's in your head?"

"That I'd forgotten how strange this Dominion is. That I need your help to make me strong. That I'm afraid I may act strangely sometimes, make mistakes, and I want you to love me enough to forgive me if I do. Will you?"

"You know I will," she said.

"I want you to share my visions, Judith. I want you to see what's shining in me and not be afraid of it."

"I'm not afraid."

"That's good to hear," he said. "That's so very good." He leaned towards her, putting his mouth close to her ear. "We make the rules from now on," he whispered. "And the world follows. Yes? There's no law but us. What we want. What we feel. We'll let that consume us, and the fire'll spread. You'll see."

He kissed the ear into which he'd poured these seductions, then her cheek, and finally her mouth. She started to kiss him back, fervently, putting her hands around his head as he had hers, kneading the flesh from which his hairs sprang and feeling its motion against his skull. He had his hands on the neck of her blouse, but he didn't bother to unbutton it. Instead he tore it open, not in a frenzy but rhythmically, rent after rent, like a ritual of uncovering. As soon as her breasts were bare his mouth was on them. Her skin was hot, but his tongue was hotter, painting her with spiral tracks of spittle, then closing his mouth around her nipples until they were harder than the tongue that teased them. His hands were reducing her skirt to tatters in the same effi-

cient way he'd torn open her blouse. She let herself drop back onto the bed, with the rags of blouse and skirt beneath her. He looked down at her, laying his palm at her crotch, which was still protected from his touch by the thin fabric of her underwear.

"How many men have had this?" he asked her, the question murmured without inflection. His head was silhouetted against the pale billows at the window, and she could not read his expression. "How many?" he said, moving the ball of his hand in a circular motion. From any other source but this the question would have offended or even enraged her. But she liked his curiosity.

"A few."

He ran his fingers down into the space between her legs and worked his middle fingers under the fabric to touch her other hole. "And this?" he said, pushing at the place.

She was less comfortable with this inquiry, verbal or digital, but he insisted. "Tell me," he said. "Who's been in here?"

"Just one," she said.

"Godolphin?" he replied.

"Yes."

He removed his finger and rose from the bed. "A family enthusiasm," he remarked.

"Where are you going?"

"Just closing the curtains," he said. "The dark's better for what we're going to do." He drew the drapes without closing the window. "Are you wearing any jewelry?" he asked her.

"Just my earrings."

"Take them off," he said.

"Can't we have a little light?"

"It's too bright as it is," he replied, though she could barely see him. He was watching her as he undressed, that much she knew. He saw her slide her earrings from the holes in her lobes and then take off her underwear. By the time she was completely naked so was he.

"I don't want a little part of you," he said, approaching

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the bottom of the bed. "I want all of you, every last piece,

And I want you to want all of me."

"I do," she said.

"I hope you mean that."

"How can I prove it?"

His gray form seemed to darken as she spoke, receding into the shadows of the room. He'd said he'd be invisible, and now he was. Though she felt his hand graze her ankle, and looked down the bed to find him, he was beyond the grasp of her eye. But pleasure flowed from his touch nevertheless.

"I want this," he said as he caressed her foot. "And this." Now her shin and thigh. "And this"—her sex—"as much as the rest, but no more. And this, and these." Belly, breasts. His touch was on them all, so he had to be very close to her now, but still invisible, "And this sweet throat, and this wonderful head," Now the hands slid away again, down her arms. "And these," he said, "to the ends of your fingers."

The touch was back at her foot again, but everywhere his hands had been—which was to say her entire body—trembled with anticipation at the touch coming again. She raised her head from the pillow a second time in the hope of glimpsing her lover.

"Lie back," he told her.

"I want to see you."

"I'm here," he said, his eyes stealing a gleam from somewhere as he spoke: two bright dots in a space that, had she not known it was bounded, could have been limitless. After his words, there was only his breath. She couldn't help but let the rhythm of her own inhalations and exhalations fall in with his, a lulling regularity which steadily slowed.

After a time, he raised her foot to his mouth and licked the sole from heel to toe in one motion. Then his breath again, cooling the fluid he'd bathed her with, and slowing still further as it came and went, until her system seemed to teeter on termination at the end of each breath, only to be coaxed back into life again as she inhaled. This was the substance of every moment, she realized: the body—never certain if the next lungful would be its last—hovering for a tiny

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time between cessation and continuance. And in that space of time, between a breath expelled and another drawn, the miraculous was easy, because neither flesh nor reason had laid their edicts there. She felt his mouth open wide enough to encompass her toes and then, impossible as it was, slide her foot into his throat.

He's going to swallow me, she thought, and the notion conjured once again the book she'd found in Estabrook's study, with its sequence of lovers enclosed in a circle of consumption: a devouring so prodigious it had ended with mutual eclipse. She felt no unease at the prospect. This wasn't the business of the visible world, where fear got fat because there was so much to win and lose. This was a place for lovers, where there was only ever gain.

She felt him draw her other leg up to his head and immerse it in the same heat; then felt him take hold of her hips and use them as purchase to impale himself upon her, inch by inch. Perhaps he'd become vast: his maw monstrous, his throat a tunnel; or perhaps she was pliant as silk, and he was drawing her into him like a magician threading fake flowers into a wand. She reached up towards him in the darkness, to feel the miracle, but her fingers couldn't interpret what buzzed beneath them. Was this *her* flesh or *his*? Ankle or cheek? There was no way of knowing. Nor, in truth, any need to know. All she wanted now was to do as the lovers in the book had done and match his devouring with her own.

She reached for the edge of the bed and turned herself half over, bringing him down beside her. Now, though her eyes were besotted by darkness, she saw the outline of his body, folded into the shadows of her own. There was nothing changed about his anatomy. Though he was consuming her, his body was in no way distorted. He lay beside her like a sleeper. She reached out to touch him a second time, not expecting to make sense of his body now but finding she could. This was his thigh; this his shin; this his ankle and foot. As she ran her palm across his flesh a delicate wave of change came with it, and his substance seemed to soften beneath her touch. The scent of his sweat was appetizing. It quickened the juices in her throat and belly. She drew her

head towards his feet and touched her lips to the substance of him. Then she was feeding; spreading her hunger around him like a mouth and closing her mind on his glistening skin. He shuddered as she took him in, and she felt the thrill of his pleasure as her own. He had already consumed her to the hips, but she quickly matched his appetite, taking his legs down into her, swallowing both his prick and the belly it lay hard against. She loved the excess of this, and its absurdity, their bodies defying physics and physique, or else making fresh proofs of both as the configuration closed upon itself. Was anything ever so easy and yet so impossible, besides love? And what was this, if not that paradox laid on a sheet? He had slowed his swallows to allow her to catch up, and now, in tandem, they closed the loop of their consumption, until their bodies were figments, and they were mouth to mouth.

Something from outside—a shout in the street, a saxophone chord—threw her back into the plausible world again, and she saw the root from which their invention had flowered. It was a commonplace conjunction: her legs crossed around his hips, his erection high inside her. She couldn't see his face, but she knew he wasn't here in this fugitive place with her. He was still dreaming their devouring. She panicked, wanted to regain the vision but not knowing how. She tightened her grip on his body and, in so doing, inspired his hips to motion. He began to move in her, breathing oh so slowly against her face. She forgot her panic and let her rhythm once again slow until it matched his. The solid world dissolved as she did so, and she returned to the place from which she'd been called to find that the loop was tightening by the moment, his mind enveloping her head as she enveloped his, like layers of an impossible onion, each one smaller than the layer it concealed: an enigma that could only exist where substance collapsed into the very mind which begged its being.

This bliss could not be sustained indefinitely, however. Before long it began once more to lose its purity, tainted by further sounds from the outside world, and this time she sensed that he was also relinquishing his hold on the delir-

ium. Perhaps, as they learned to be lovers again, they'd find a way to sustain the state for longer: spend nights and days, perhaps, lost in the precious space between a breath expelled and another drawn. But for now she would have to be content with the ecstasy they'd had. Reluctantly, she let the tropic night in which they'd devoured each other be subsumed into a simpler darkness, and, without quite knowing where consciousness began and ended, she fell asleep.

When she awoke she was alone in the bed. That disappointment apart, she felt both lively and light. What they'd shared was a commodity more marketable than a cure for the common cold: a high without a hangover. She sat up, reaching for a sheet to drape around her, but before she could stand she heard his voice in the predawn gloom. He was standing by the window, with a fold of curtain clipped between middle and forefinger, his eye to the chink he'd opened.

"It's time for me to get working," he said softly.

"It's still early," she said.

"The sun's almost up," he replied. "I can't waste time."

He let the curtain drop and crossed to the bed. She sat up and put her arms around his torso. She wanted to spend time with him, luxuriating in the calm she felt, but his instinct was healthier. They both had work to do.

"I'd rather stay here than return to the studio," he said. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all," she replied. "In fact, I'd like you to stay."

"I'll be coming and going at odd hours."

"As long as you find your way back into bed once in a while," she said.

"I'll be with you," he said, running his hand down from her neck to rub her belly. "From now on, I'll be with you night and day."

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Though Jude's memory of the night before was vivid, she had no recollection of either herself or Gentle taking the telephone off the hook, and it wasn't until nine-thirty the following morning, when she decided to call Clem, that she realized that one of them had done so. She replaced the receiver, only to have the telephone ring seconds later. At the other end of the line was a voice she'd almost given up expecting to hear again: Oscar. At first she thought he was breathless, but after a few stumbling sentences she realized his pantings were barely suppressed sobs.

"Where have you been, my darling? I've rung and rung since I got your note. I thought you were dead."

"The phone was off the hook, that's all. Where are you?"

"At the house. Will you come? Please. I need you here!" He spoke with escalating panic, as though she were punctuating his appeals with refusals. "We don't have much time."

"Of course I'll come," she told him.

"Now," he insisted. "You've got to come now."

She told him she'd be on his doorstep within the hour, and he replied that she'd find him waiting. Putting off her call to Clem and putting on a little makeup, she headed out. Though it wasn't yet midmorning the sun was blazing hot, and as she drove she remembered the monologue that she and Gentle had been treated to on their ride back from the estate. Monsoons and heat waves all through the summer, the doomsayer had predicted; and how he'd relished his prophecies! She'd thought his enthusiasm grotesque at the time, a petty mind indulging in apocalyptic fantasies. But now, after the extraordinary night she'd had with Gentle, she found herself wondering how these bright streets might be made to experience the miracles of the previous mid-

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night: sluiced of vehicles by an almighty rain, then softened in the blaze of sun, so that solid matter flowed like warm treacle and a city divided into public places and private, into wealthy ghettos and gutters, became a continuum. Was this what Gentle had meant when he'd talked about her sharing his vision? If so, she was ready for more.

Regent's Park Road was quieter than usual. There were no kids playing on the pavement and, though she'd had a hellish time carving her way through the traffic just two streets away, no vehicles parked within half a mile of the house. It stood shunned, but for her. She didn't need to knock. Before she'd even set her heel on the step the door was opening, and there was Oscar, looking harried, beckoning her in. He answered the door dry-eyed, but as soon as it was closed and locked and bolted, he put his arms around her and the tears began, great sobs that racked his bulk. Over and over he told her how much he loved her, missed her, and needed her, now more than ever. She embraced him and calmed him as best she could. After a time he controlled himself and ushered her through to the kitchen. The lights were burning throughout the house, but after the blaze of the day their contribution looked jaundiced and didn't flatter him. His face was pale, where it wasn't discolored with bruises; his hands were puffed and raw. There were other wounds, she guessed, beneath his unpressed clothes. Watching him brew Earl Grey for them, she saw a look of discomfort cross his face when he moved too fast. Their talk, of course, rapidly turned to their parting at the Retreat.

"I was certain Dowd would slit your throat as soon as you got to Yzordderrex."

"He didn't lay a finger on me," she said. Then added, "That's not quite true. He did later. But when we arrived he was too badly hurt." She paused. "So are you."

"I was in a pretty wretched state," he said. "I wanted to follow you, but I could barely stand. I came back here, got agun, licked my wounds awhile, then crossed over. But by that time you'd gone."

"So you *did* follow?"

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"Of course. Did you think I'd leave you in Yzordder-rex?"

He set a large cup of tea in front of her, and honey to sweeten it with. She didn't usually indulge, but she hadn't breakfasted, so she put enough spoonfuls of honey into the tea to turn it into an aromatic syrup.

"By the time I reached Peccable's house," Oscar went on, "it was empty. There were riots going on outside. I didn't know where to start looking for you. It was a nightmare."

"You know the Autarch was deposed?"

"No, I didn't, but I'm not surprised. Every New Year, Peccable would say, 'He'll go this year, he'll go this year. What happened to Dowd, by the way?'"

"He's dead," she said, with a little smile of satisfaction.

"Are you sure? His type is difficult to kill, my dear, let me tell you. I speak from bitter experience."

"You were saying—"

"Yes. What *was* I saying?"

"That you followed us and found Peccable's house empty."

"And half the city in flames." He sighed. "It was tragic, seeing it like that. All that mindless destruction. The revenge of the proles. Oh, I know, I should be celebrating a victory for democracy, but what's going to be left? My lovely Yzordderex: rubble. I looked at it and I said, 'This is the end of an era, Oscar. After this, everything'll be different. Darker.'" He looked up from the tea into which he'd been staring. "Did Peccable survive, do you know?"

"He was going to leave with Hoi-Poltoi. I assume he did. He emptied the cellar."

"No, that was me. And I'm glad I did it."

He cast a glance towards the windowsill. Nestling among the domestic bric-a-brac were a series of diminutive figurines. Talismans, she guessed: part of the horde from Peccable's cellar. Some were looking into the room, others out. They were all little paradigms of aggression, with positively rabid expressions on their garishly painted faces.

"But you're my best protection," he said. "Just having

you here, I feel we've got some chance of surviving this mess." He put his hand over hers. "When I got your note and knew you'd survived, I began to hope a little. Then of course I couldn't get hold of you, and I began to imagine the worst."

She looked up from his hand and saw on his plagued face a family resemblance she'd never glimpsed before. There was an echo of Charlie in him, the Charlie of the Hampstead hospice, sitting at his window talking about bodies being dug up in the rain.

"Why didn't you just come to the flat?" she said.

"I couldn't leave here."

"Are you that badly hurt?"

"It's not what's in here that held me back," he said, putting his hand to his chest. "It's what's out there."

"You still think the Tabula Rasa's going to come after you?"

"God, no. They're the least of our worries. I half thought of warning one or two of them: anonymously, you know. Not Shales or McGann, or that idiot Bloxham. They can fry in Hell. But Lionel was always friendly, even when he was sober. And the ladies. I don't like the idea of their deaths on my conscience."

"So who are you hiding from?"

"The fact is, I don't know," he admitted. "I see images in the bowl, and I can't quite make them out."

She'd forgotten the Boston Bowl, with its blur of prophetic stones. Now Oscar was apparently hanging on its every rattle.

"Something's crossed over from the Dominions, my dear," he said. "I'm certain of that. I saw it coming after you. Trying to smother you...."

He looked as though tears were going to overtake him again, but she reassured him, lightly patting his hand as though he were some addled old man.

"Nothing's going to harm me," she said. "I've survived too much in the last few days."

"You've never seen a power like this," he warned her. "And neither's the Fifth."

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"If it came from the Dominions, then it's the Autarch's doing."

"You sound very certain."

"That's because I know who he is."

"You've been listening to Peccable," he said. "He's full of theories, darling, but they're not worth a damn."

His not-so-faint condescension irritated her, and she drew her hand out from under his. "My source is a lot more reliable than Peccable," she said.

"Oh?" He realized he'd caused offense and indulged her. "Who's that?"

"Quaisoir."

"Quaisoir? How the hell did you get to her?" His surprise seemed to be as genuine as his humoring had been feigned.

"Don't you have any idea?" she asked him. "Didn't Dowd ever talk to you about the old days?"

Now his expression became guarded, almost suspicious.

"Dowd served generations of Godolphins," she said. "Surely you knew that? Right back to crazy Joshua. In fact, he was Joshua's right-hand man, if man's the word."

"I was aware of that," Oscar said softly.

"Then you knew about me too?"

He said nothing,

"Did you, Oscar?"

"I didn't debate you with Dowd, if that's what you mean."

"But you knew why you and Charlie kept me in the family?"

Now it was he who was offended; he grimaced at her vocabulary.

"That's what it was, Oscar. You and Charlie, trading me; knowing I was bound to stay with the Godolphins. Maybe I'd wander off for a while and have a few romances, but sooner or later I'd be back in the family."

"We both loved you," he said, his voice as blank as the look he now gave her. "Believe me, neither of us understood the politics of it. We didn't care."

"Oh really?" she said, her doubt plain.

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"All I know is: I love you. It's the one certainty left in my life."

She was tempted to sour this saccharine with chapter and verse of his family's conspiracies against her, but what was the use? He was a fractured man, locked away in his house for fear of what the sun might invite over his threshold. Circumstance had already undone him. Any further work on her part would be malice, and though she didn't doubt that there was much in him to despise—his talk of the revenge of the proles had been particularly unattractive—she'd shared too many intimacies with him, and been too comforted by them, to be cruel. Besides, she had something to impart that would be a harder blow than any accusation.

"I'm not staying, Oscar," she said. "I haven't come back here to lock myself away." ^

"But it's not safe out there," he replied. "I've seen what's coming. It's in the bowl. You want to see for yourself?" He stood up. "You'll change your mind."

He led her up the stairs to the treasure room, talking as he went.

"The bowl's got a life of its own since this power came into the Fifth. It doesn't need anybody watching, it

just goes on repeating the same images. It's panicking. It knows what's coming, and it's panicking."

She could hear it before they even reached the door: as if like the drumming of hailstones on sun-baked earth.

"I don't think it's wise to watch for too long," he warned. "It gets hypnotic."

So saying, he opened the door. The bowl was sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a ring of votive candles, their fat flames jumping as the air was agitated by the spectacle they lit. The prophetic stones were moving like a swarm of enraged bees in and above the bowl, which Oscar had been obliged to set in a small mound of earth to keep it from being thrown over by their violence. The air smelled of what he'd called their panic: a bitter odor mingled with the metallic tang that came before lightning. Though the motion of the stones was reasonably contained, she hung back from the bowl lest a rogue find its way out of the dance

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and strike her. At the speed they were moving, the smallest of them could have taken out an eye. But even from a distance, with the shelves and their treasures to distract her, the motion of the stones was all consuming. The rest of the room, Oscar included, faded into insignificance as the frenzy drew her in.

"It may take a little time," Oscar was saying. "But the images are there." "I see," she said.

The Retreat had already appeared in the blur, its dome half hidden behind the screen of the copse. Its appearance was brief. The Tabula Rasa's tower took its place a moment after, only to be superseded by a third building, quite different from the pair that had gone before, except that it too was half concealed by foliage, in this case a single tree planted in the pavement.

"What's that house?" she asked Oscar. "I don't know, but it comes up over and over again. It's somewhere in London, I'm certain of that." "How can you be sure?"

The building was unremarkable: three stories, flat-fronted, and, as far as she could judge, in a dilapidated state. It could have stood in any inner city in England or for that matter in Europe.

"London's where the circle's going to close," Oscar replied. "It's where everything began, and it's where every-thing'll end."

The remark brought echoes: of Dowd at the wall on Pale Hill, talking about history coming around, and of Gentle and herself, mere hours before, devouring each other into perfection.

"There it is again," Oscar said.

The image of the house had briefly flickered out but now reappeared, brightly lit. There was somebody near the step, she saw, with his arms hanging by his sides and his head back as he stared up at the sky. The resolution of the image was not good enough for her to make out his features. Perhaps he was just some anonymous sun worshiper, but she doubted it. Every detail of this parade had its significance.

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Now the image decayed again, and the noonday scene, with its gleaming foliage and its pristine sky, gave

way to a roiling juggernaut of smoke, all black and gray.

"Here it comes," she heard Oscar say.

There were forms in the smoke, rising, withering, and falling as ash, but their nature defied her interpretation. Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she took a step towards the bowl.

"Don't, darling," Oscar said.

"What are we seeing?" she asked, ignoring his caution.

"The power," he said. "That's what's coming into the Fifth. Or already here."

"But that's not Sartori."

"Sartori?" he said.

"The Autarch."

Defying his own warning, he came to her side and again said, "Sartori? The Maestro?"

She didn't look around at him. The juggernaut demanded her utter devotion. Much as she hated to admit it to herself, Oscar had been right, talking of immeasurable powers. This was no human agency at work. It was a force of stupendous scale, advancing over a landscape she'd first thought covered by a stubble of gray grass but which she now realized was a city, those frail stalks buildings, toppling as the power burned out their foundations and overturned them.

No wonder Oscar was trembling behind locked doors; this was a terrible sight, and one for which she was unprepared. However atrocious Sartori's deeds, he was just a tyrant in a long and squalid history of tyrants, men whose fear of their own frailty made them monstrous. But this was a horror of another order entirely, beyond curing by politics or poisonings: a vast, unforgiving power, capable of sweeping all the Maestros and despots that had carved their names on the face of the world away without pausing to think about it. Had Sartori unleashed this immensity? she wondered. Was he so insane that he thought he could survive such devastation and build his New York order on the rubble it left behind? Or was his lunacy profounder

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still? Was this juggernaut the true city of which he'd dreamed: a metropolis of storm and smoke that would stand to the World's End because that was its true name?

Now the sight was consumed by total darkness, and she let go of the breath she'd been holding.

"It isn't over," Oscar said, his voice close to her ear.

The darkness began to shred in several places, and through the gashes she saw a single figure, lying on a gray floor. It was herself: a crude representation, but recognizable.

"I warned you," Oscar said.

The darkness this image had appeared through didn't entirely evaporate, but lingered like a fog, and out

of it a second figure came and sank down beside her. She knew before the action had unraveled that Oscar had made an error, thinking this was a prophecy of harm. The shadow between her legs was no killer. It was Gentle, and this scene was here, in the bowl's report, because the Reconciler stood as a sign of hope to set against the despair that had come before. She heard Oscar moan as the shadow lover reached for her, putting his hand between her legs, then raising her foot to his mouth to begin his devouring.

"It's killing you," Oscar said.

Watched remotely, this was a rational interpretation. But it wasn't death, of course, it was love. And it wasn't prophecy, it was history: the very act they'd performed the night before. Oscar was viewing it like a child, seeing its parents make love and thinking violence was being done in the marital bed. She was glad of his error, in a way, saving her as it did from the problem of explaining this coupling.

She and the Reconciler were quickly intertwined, the veils of darkness attending on the act and deepening their mingled shadows, so that the lovers became a single knot, which shrank and shrank and finally disappeared altogether, leaving the stones to rattle on as an abstraction.

It was a strangely intimate conclusion to the sequence. From temple, tower, and house to the storm had been a grim progression, but from the storm to this vision of love

was altogether more optimistic: a sign, perhaps, that union could bring an end to the darkness that had gone before.

"That's all there is," Oscar said. "It just begins again from here. Round and round."

She turned from the bowl as the din of stones, which had quieted as the love scene was sketched, became loud again.

"You see the danger you're in?" he said.

"I think I'm just an afterthought," she said, hoping to steer him away from an analysis of what had been depicted.

"Not to me you're not," he replied, putting his arms around her. For all his wounds, he was not a man to be resisted easily. "I want to protect you," he said. "That's my duty. I see that now. I know you've been mistreated, but I can make reparations for that. I can keep you here, safe and sound."

"So you think we can hole up here and Armageddon will just pass over?"

"Have you got a better idea?"

"Yes. We resist it, at all costs."

"There's no victory to be had against the likes of that," he said.

She could hear the stones' thunder behind her and knew they were picturing the storm again.

"At least we've got some defenses here," he went on. "I've got spirit guards at every door and every window. You saw those in the kitchen? They're the tiniest."

"All male, are they?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"They're not going to protect you, Oscar."

"They're all we've got."

"Maybe they're all *you've* got—"

She slipped from his arms and headed for the door. He followed her out onto the landing, demanding to know what she meant by this, and finally, inflamed by his cowardice, she turned back to him.

"There's been a power under your nose for years."

"What power? Where?"

"Sealed up beneath Roxborough's tower."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

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"You don't know who she is?"

"No," he said, angered now. "This is nonsense."

"I've seen her, Oscar."

"How? Nobody but the Tabula Rasa gets into the tower."

"I could show her to you. Take you to the very place."

She dropped her volume, studying Oscar's anxious, ruddy features as she spoke. "I think maybe she's some kind of Goddess. I've tried to get her out twice and failed. I need help. I need *your* help."

"It's impossible," he replied. "The tower's a fortress, now more than ever. I tell you, this house is the only safe place left in the city. It would be suicide for me to step out of here."

"Then that's that," she said, not about to debate with such timidity. She started down the stairs, ignoring his calls for her to wait.

"You can't leave me," he said, as though amazed. "I love you. Do you hear me? I love you."

"There's more important things than love," she returned, thinking as she spoke that this was easy to say with Gentle awaiting her at home. But it was also true. She'd seen this city overturned and pitched into dust. Preventing that was indeed more important than love, especially Oscar's spineless variety.

"Don't forget to lock up after me," she said as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "You never know what's going to come knocking on the door."

2

On the way home she stopped to buy groceries, which had never been her favorite chore but was today elevated into the realms of the surreal by the sense of foreboding she brought with her. Here she was going about the business of purchasing domestic necessities, while the image of the killing cloud turned in her head. But life had to go on, even if oblivion waited in the wings. She needed milk, bread, and toilet paper; she needed deodorant and waste bags to line

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the bin in the kitchen. It was only in fiction that the daily round of living was ignored so that grand events could take center stage. Her body would hunger, tire, sweat, and digest until the final pall descended. There was peculiar comfort in this thought, and though the darkness gathering at the threshold of her world should have, distracted her from trivialities, its presence had precisely the reverse effect. She was more picky than usual about the cheese she bought and sniffed at half a dozen deodorants before she found a scent that pleased her.

The shopping done, she headed home through streets buzzing with the business of a sunlit day, contemplating the problem of Celestine as she went. With Oscar plainly unwilling to aid her, she would have to look for help elsewhere, and with her circle of trusted souls so shrunk, that only left Clem and Gentle. The Reconciler had his own agenda, of course, but after the promises of the night before—the commitments to be with each other, sharing the fears and the visions—he'd surely understand her need to liberate Celestine, if only to put an end to the mystery. She would tell him all she knew about Roxborough's prisoner, she decided, as soon as possible.

He wasn't home when she got back, which was no surprise. He'd warned her that he'd be keeping odd hours as he laid the groundwork for the Reconciliation. She prepared some lunch, then decided she hadn't got an appetite and went to work one up by tidying the bedroom, which was still chaos after the night's traffic. As she straightened the sheets she discovered they had a tiny occupant: the blue stone (or, as she preferred to think of it, the egg), which had been in one of the pockets of her ravaged clothes. The sight of it diverted her from her bed making, and she sat on the edge of the mattress, passing the egg from hand to hand, wondering if perhaps it could deliver her, even briefly, into the cell where Celestine was locked. It had of course been much reduced by Dowd's mites, but even when she'd first discovered it in Estabrook's safe it had been a fragment of a greater form and possessed some jurisdiction. Did it still?

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"Show me the Goddess," she said, clutching the egg tight. "Show me the Goddess."

Spoken plainly that way, the notion of her mind's removal from the physical world, and its flight, seemed absurd. That wasn't the way the world worked, except perhaps at enchanted midnights. Now it was the middle of the afternoon, and the noise of day rose through the open window. She was loath to go and close it, however. She couldn't exile the world every time she wanted to alter her consciousness. The street and the people in it—the dirt and the din and the summer sky—all had to be made part of the mechanism for transcendence, or else she'd come to grief the way her sister had, bound up and blind long before her eyes went from her head.

As was her wont, she began to talk to herself, coaxing the miracle. "It's happened before," she said. "It can happen again. Be patient, woman."

But the longer she sat, the stronger the sense of her own ludicrousness became. The image of her idiot devotion appeared in her mind's eye. There she was, sitting on the bed, staring at a piece of dead stone: a study in fatuity,

"Fool," she said to herself.

Suddenly weary of the whole fiasco, she got up from the bed. In that rising she realized her error. Her mind's eye showed her the motion as if it was detached from her, hovering near the window. She felt a sudden pang of panic and for the second time in the space of thirty seconds called herself fool, not for wasting time with the egg but for failing to realize that the image she'd taken as evidence of her own failure, that of herself sitting waiting for something to happen, was in fact proof that it had. Her sight had drifted from her so subtly she'd not even known it had gone.

"The cell," she said, instructing her subtle eye. "Show me the Goddess's cell.*"

Though it was close to the window, and could have flown from there, her eye instead rose at a sickening speed, till she was looking down at herself from the ceiling. She saw her body rock below her, as the flight giddied her. Then her sight descended. The top of her head loomed like a planet

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beneath her, and she was plunged into her skull, down, down into the darkness of her body. She felt her own panic on all sides: the frantic labor of her heart, her lungs drawing shallow breaths. There was none of the brightness she'd found in Celestine's body, no hint of that luminous blue the Goddess had shared with the stone. There was only the dark and its turmoil. She wanted to make the egg understand its mistake and draw her mind's eye up out of this pit, but if her lips were making such pleas, which she doubted, they were ignored, and her fall went on, and on, as though her sight had become a fly speck in a well and would fall for hours without reaching its bowels.

And then, below her, a tiny point of light, which grew as she approached, to show itself not a point but a strip of rippling luminescence, like the purest glyph imaginable. What was this doing inside her? Was it some relic of the working that had created her, a fragment of Sartori's feat, like Gen?tle's signature hidden in the brushwork of his forged can?vases? She was upon it now, or rather *in* it, its brightness ablaze that made her mind's eye squint.

And out of the blaze, images. Such images! She knew neither their origins nor their purpose, but they were exquisite enough to make her forgive the misdirection that had led her here rather than to Celestine. She seemed to be in a paradisiacal city, half overgrown with glorious flora, the profusion of which was fed by waters that rose like arches and colonnades on every side. Flocks of stars flew overhead and made perfect circles at her zenith; mists hung at her ankles, laying their veils beneath her feet to ease her step. She passed through this city like a hallowed daughter and came to rest in a large airy room, where water cascaded in place of doors, and the merest stab of sun brought rainbows. There she sat and with these borrowed eyes saw her own face and breasts, so vast they might have been sculpted for a temple, raised above her. Did milk seep from her nipples, and did she sing a lullaby? She thought so; but her attention strayed too quickly from breasts and face to be sure, her gaze turned towards the far end of the chamber. Somebody had entered: a man, so wounded and ill-mended she didn't

recognize him at first. It was only when he was almost upon her that she realized the company she kept. It was Gentle, unshaven and badly fed, but greeting her with tears of joy in his eyes. If words were exchanged she didn't hear them, but he fell to his knees in front of her, and her gaze went between his upturned face and the monumental effigy behind her. It was not, after all, a thing of painted stone, but was in this vision made of living flesh, moving, weeping, even glancing down at the worshiper she was.

And this was strange enough, but there was stranger still to come, as she looked back towards Gentle and saw him pluck from a hand too tiny to be hers the very stone that had given her this dream. He took it with gratitude, his tears finally abating. Then he rose, and as he made his way back towards the liquid door, the day beyond it blazed, and the scene was washed away in light.

She sensed that the enigma, whatever it signified, was passing away, but she had no power to hold it. The glyph in her core appeared before her, and she rose from it like a diver from some treasure the deep would not relinquish, up through the dark and out into the place she'd left.

Nothing had changed in the room, but a sudden squall was on the world outside, its torrent heavy enough to drop a sheet of water between the raised window and the sill. She stood up, clutching the stone. The journey had left her light-headed, however, and she knew if she tried to go to the kitchen and put some food in her belly her legs would fold up beneath her, so she lay down and let the pillow have her head awhile.

3

She didn't think she slept, but it was as difficult to distinguish between sleep and wakefulness as it had been in Quai-soir's bed. The visions she'd seen in the darkness of her own belly were as insistent as some prophetic dream and stayed with her, the music of the rain a perfect accompaniment to the memory. It was only when the clouds moved on, taking

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their deluge south, and the sun appeared between the sodden curtains, that sleep overcame her.

When she woke, it was to the sound of Gentle's key in the lock. It was night, or close to it, and he switched on the light in the adjacent room. She sat up and was about to call to him when she thought better of it and, instead, watched through the partially open door. She saw his face for only an instant, but the glimpse was enough to make her want him to come in to her with kisses. He didn't. Instead, he paced back and forth next door, massaging his hands as though they ached, working first at the fingers, then at the palms.

Finally, she couldn't be patient any longer and got up, sleepily murmuring his name. He didn't hear her at first, and she had to speak again before he realized it was being called. Only then did he turn and put on a smile for her.

"Still awake?" he said fondly. "You shouldn't have stayed up."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." He put his hands to his face. "This is a hard business, you know. I didn't expect it

to be so difficult."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Some other time," he said, approaching the door. She took his hands in hers. "What's this?" he said.

She was still holding the egg, but not for long. He had it from her palm with the ease of a pickpocket. She wanted to snatch it back, but she fought the instinct and let him study his prize.

"Pretty," he said. Then, less lightly: "Where did it come from?"

Why did she hesitate to answer? Because he looked so weary, and she didn't want to burden him with new mysteries when he had a surfeit of his own? It was that in part; but there was another part that was altogether less clear to her. Something to do with the fact that in her vision she'd seen him far more broken than he was at present, wounded and wretched, and somehow that condition had to remain her secret, at least for a time.

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He put the egg to his nose and sniffed it. "I smell you," he said.

"No...."

"Yes, I do. Where have you been keeping it?" He put his empty hand between her legs. "In here?"

The thought was not so preposterous. Indeed she might slip it into that pocket, when she had it back, and enjoy its weight.

"No?" he said. "Well, I'm sure it wishes you would. I think half the world would like to creep up there if it could." He pressed his hand against her. "But it's mine, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Nobody goes in there but me."

"No."

She answered mechanically, her thoughts as much on reclaiming the egg as on his proprietorial talk.

"Have you got anything we can get high on?" he said.

"I had some dope...."

"Where is it?"

"I think I smoked the last of it. I'm not sure. Do you want me to look?"

"Yes, please."

She reached up for the egg, but before her fingers could take hold of it he put it to his lips.

"I want to keep it," he said. "Sniff it for a while. You don't mind, do you?"

"I'd like it back."

"You'll have it back," he said, with a faint air of condescension, as though her possessiveness was childish. "But I need a keepsake, something to remind me of you."

"I'll give you some of my underwear," she said.

"It's not quite the same."

He laid the egg against his tongue and turned it, coating it in his spittle. She watched him, and he watched her back. He knew damn well she wanted her toy, but she wasn't going to stoop to begging him for it.

"You mentioned dope," he said.

She went back into the bedroom, put on the lamp beside

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the bed, and searched through the top drawer of her dresser where she'd last stashed her marijuana.

"Where did you go today?" he asked her.

"I went to Oscar's house."

"Oscar?"

"Godolphin."

"And how's Oscar? Alive and kicking?"

"I can't find the dope. I must have smoked it all."

"You were telling me about Oscar."

"He's locked himself up in his house."

"Where does he live? Maybe I should call on him. Reassure him." ^

"He won't see you. He won't see anybody. He thinks the world's coming to an end."

"And what do you think?"

She shrugged. She was quietly raging at him, but she wasn't exactly sure why. He'd taken the egg for a while, but that wasn't a capital crime. If the stone afforded him a little protection, why should she be covetous of it? She was being petty, and she wished she could be other, but without the heat of sex shimmering between them he seemed crass. It was not a flaw she expected to find in him. Lord knows she'd accused him of countless deficiencies in her time, but a lack of finesse had never been one of them. If anything, he'd been too much the polished operator, discreet and suave.

"You were telling me about the end of the world," he said.

"Was I?"

"Did Oscar frighten you?"

"No. But I saw something that did."

She told him, briefly, about the bowl and its prophecies. He listened without comment, then said, "The Fifth's teetering. We both know that. But it won't touch us."

She'd heard the same sentiments from Oscar, or nearencough. Both these men, wanting to offer her a haven from the storm. She should have been flattered. Gentle looked at his watch.

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"I've got to go out again," he said, "You'll be safe here, won't you?"

"I'll be fine."

"You should sleep. Make yourself strong. There's going to be some dark times before it gets light again, and we're going to find some of that darkness in each other. It's perfectly natural. We're not angels, after all." He chuckled. "At least, you may be, but I'm not."

So saying, he pocketed the egg.

"Go back to bed," he said. "I'll be back in the morning. And don't worry, nothing's going to come near you but me. I swear. I'm with you, Judith, all the time. And that's not love talking."

With that, he smiled at her and headed off, leaving her to wonder what indeed had been talking, if it wasn't love.

II

I

"And who the fuck are you?" the filthy, bearded face demanded of the stranger who'd had the misfortune to stumble into its bleary sight.

The man he was questioning, whom he had by the neck, shook his head. Blood had run from a crown of cuts and scrapes along his brow, where he'd earlier beaten his skull against a stone wall to try and silence the din of voices that echoed between his temples. It hadn't worked. There were still too many names and faces in there to be sorted out. The only way he could answer his interrogator was with that shaking of his head. Who was he? He didn't know.

"Well, get the fuck out of here," the man said.

There was a bottle of cheap wine in his hand, and its stench, mingled with a deeper rot, on his breath. He pushed his victim against the concrete wall of this underpass and closed upon him.

"You can't sleep where you fuckin' want. If you want to

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lie down, you fuckin' ask me first. I say who sleeps here. Isn't that right?"

He swung his bloodshot eyes in the direction of the tribe who'd clambered from their beds of trash and newspaper to watch their leader have his sport. There'd be blood, for certain. There always was when Tolland got riled, and for some reason he was more riled by this trespasser than by others who'd laid down their homeless heads without his permission.

"Isn't that right?" he said again. "Irish? Tell him! *Isn't* that right?"

The man he'd addressed muttered something incoherent. The woman beside him, with a bead of hair bleached to near extinction but black at the roots, came within striking distance of Tolland—something only a very few dared to do.

"That's right, Tolly," she said. "That's right." She looked at the victim without pity. "D'you think he's a Jew-boy? He's got a Jew-boy's nose."

Tolland took down a throatful of wine. "Are you a fuckin' yid?" he said.

Someone in the crowd said they should strip him and see. The woman, who went by a number of names but whom Tolland called Carol when he fucked her, made to do just that, but he aimed a blow at her and she retreated.

"You get your fuckin' hands off him," Tolland said. "He'll tell us, won't you, matey? You'll tell us. Are you a fuckin' yid or not?"

He took hold of the man by the lapel of his jacket.

"I'm waitin'," he said.

The victim dug for a word, and found: "... Gentle ..."

"Gentile?" Tolland said. "Yeah? You a Gentile? Well, I don't give a fuck *what* you are! I don't want you here."

The other nodded and tried to detach Tolland's fingers, but his captor hadn't finished. He slammed the man against the wall, so hard the breath went out of him.

"Irish? Take the fuckin' bottle."

The Irishman claimed the bottle from Tolland's hands and stepped back to let him do his worst.

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"Don't kill him," the woman said,

"What the fuck do you care?" Tolland spat and delivered two, three, four punches to the Gentile's solar

plexus, followed by a knee jab to his groin. Pinned against the wall by his neck, the man could do little to defend himself, but even that little he failed to do, accepting the punishment even though tears of pain ran from his eyes. He stared through them with a look of bewilderment on his face, small exclamations of pain coming with every blow.

"He's a head case, Tolly," the Irishman said. "Look at him! He's a friggin' head case."

Tolland didn't glance the Irishman's way, or slow his beating, but delivered a new fusillade of punches. The Gentle's body now hung limply from the pinion of his hand, the face above it blanker by the blow.

"You hear me, Tolly?" the Irishman said. "He's a nutter. He's not feeling it."

"You keep the fuck out of this."

"Why don't you leave him alone?"

"He's on my fuckin' patch," Tolland said.

He dragged the Gentle away from the wall and swung him around. The small crowd backed off to give their leader room to play. With Irish silenced, there were no objections raised from any quarter. Tolland was left to beat the Gentle to the ground. Then he followed through with a barrage of kicks. His victim put his hands around his head and curled up to protect himself as best he could, whimpering. But Tolland wasn't about to let the man's face go unbroken. He reached down and dragged the hands away, raising his boot to bring it down. Before he could do so, however, Tolland's bottle hit the floor, spattering wine as it smashed. He turned on Irish.

"What the fuck d'you that for?"

"You shouldn't beat up head cases," the man replied, by his tone already regretting the breakage.

"You goin' to stop me?"

"All I'm sayin'—"

"Are you goin' to try and fuckin' stop me?"

"He's not right in the head, Tolly."

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"So I'll kick some sense into him," Tolland replied.

He dropped his victim's arms, turning all his crazed attention on the dissenter.

"Or do *you* want to do it?" he said.

Irish shook his head.

"Go on," said Tolland. "You do it for me." He stepped over the Gentle in the Irishman's direction. "Go on..." he said again. "Go on...."

Irish began to retreat, Tolland bearing down on him. The Gentile had meanwhile turned himself over and was starting to crawl away, blood running from his nose and from the wounds reopened on his brow. Nobody moved to help him. When Tolland was roused, as now, his fury knew no bounds. Anyone who stepped in his way—whether man, woman, or child—was forfeit. He broke bones and heads without a second thought; had ground a broken bottle into a man's eye once, not twenty yards from this spot, for the crime of looking at him too long. There wasn't a cardboard city north or south of the river where he wasn't known, and prayers said in the hope that he'd not come visiting.

Before he could grab hold of Irish the man threw up his hands in defeat.

"All right, Tolly, all right," he said. "It was my mistake. I swear, I'm sorry."

"You broke my fuckin' bottle."

"Hi fetch you another. I will. I'll do it now."

Irish had known Tolland longer than anyone else in this circle and was familiar with the rules of placation: copious apology, witnessed by as many of Tolland's tribe as possible. It wasn't foolproof, but today it worked.

"Will I be fetchin' you a bottle now?" Irish said.

"Get me two, you fuckin' scab."

"That's what I am, Tolly. I'm a scab."

"And one for Carol," Tolland said.

"I'll do that"

Tolland leveled a grimy finger at Irish. "And don't you ever try crossin' me again, or I'll have your fuckin' balls."

With this promise made, Tolland turned back to his victim. Seeing that the Gentile had already crawled some dis-

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tance from him, he let out an incoherent roar of fury, and those of the crowd who were standing within a yard or two of the path between him and his target retreated. Tolland didn't hurry, but watched as the wounded Gentile laboriously got to his feet and began to make a staggering escape through the chaos of boxes and strewn bedding.

Up ahead, a youth of sixteen or so was kneeling on the ground, covering the concrete slabs underfoot with designs in colored chalk, blowing the pastel dust off his hands as he went. Engrossed in his art he'd ignored the beating that had claimed the attention of the others, but now he heard Tolland's voice echoing through the underpass, calling his name.

"Monday, you fuckhead! Get hold of him!"

The youth looked up. His hair was cropped to a dark fuzz, his skin pockmarked, his ears sticking out like handles. His gaze was clear, however, despite the track marks that disfigured his arms, and it took him only a second to realize his dilemma. If he brought down the bleeding man, he'd condemn him. If he didn't, he'd condemn himself. To gain a little time he feigned bafflement, cupping his hand behind his ear as if he'd missed Tolland's instruction.

"Stop him!" came the brute's command.

Monday started to get to his feet, murmuring, "Get the fuck out of here," to the escapee as he did so.

But the idiot had stumbled to a halt, his eyes fixed on the picture Monday had been making. It was filched from a newspaper photo of a starlet, wide-eyed, posing with a koala in her arms. Monday had rendered the woman with loving accuracy, but the koala had become a patchwork beast, with a single burning eye in its brooding head.

"Didn't you hear me?" Monday said.

The man ignored him.

"It's your funeral," he said, rising now as Tolland approached, pushing the man from the edge of his picture. "Go on," he said, "or he'll bust it up! Get away!" He pushed hard, but the man remained fixated. "You're gettin' blood on it, dickhead!"

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Tolland yelled for Irish, and the man hurried to his side, eager to make good.

"What, Tolly?"

"Collar that fuckin' kid."

Irish was obedient and headed straight for Monday, taking hold of the boy. Tolland, meanwhile, had caught up with the Gentile, who hadn't moved from his place on the edge of the colored paving.

"Don't let him bleed on it!" Monday begged.

Tolland threw the youth a glance, then stepped onto the picture, scraping his boots over the carefully worked face. Monday raised a moan of protest as he watched the bright chalk colors reduced to a gray-brown dust.

"Don't, man, don't," he pleaded.

But his complaints only riled the vandal further. Seeing Monday's tobacco tin of chalks within reach of his boot, Tolland went to scatter them, but Monday, dragging himself out of Irish's grip, flung himself down to preserve them. Tolland's kick landed in the boy's flank, and he was sent sprawling, rolled in chalk dust. Tolland's heel booted the tin and its contents, then he came after its protector a second time. Monday curled up, anticipating the blow. But it never landed. The Gentile's voice came between Tolland and his intention.

"Don't do that," he said.

Nobody had custody of him, and he could have made another attempt to escape while Tolland went after Monday, but he was still at the edge of the picture, his gaze no longer on it but on its spoiler.

"What the fuck did you say?" Tolland's mouth opened like a toothed wound in his matted beard.

"I said: *Don't ...do... that,*"

Whatever pleasure Tolland had derived from this hunt was over now, and there wasn't one among the spectators who didn't know it. The sport that would have ended with an ear bitten off or a few broken ribs had become something else entirely, and several of the crowd, having no stomach for what they knew was coming, retired from their places at the ringside. Even the hardest of them backed

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away a few paces, their drugged, drunken, or simply addled minds dimly aware that something far worse than bloodletting was imminent.

Tolland turned on the Gentile, reaching into his jacket as he did so. A knife emerged, its nine-inch blade marked with nicks and scratches. At the sight of it, even Irish retreated. He'd seen Tolland's blade at work only once before, but it was enough.

There were no jabs or taunts now, just Tolland's drink-rotted bulk lurking towards his victim to bring the man down. The Gentile stepped back as the knife came, his eyes going to the designs underfoot. They were like the pictures that filled his head to overflowing; brightnesses that had been smeared into gray dust. But somewhere in the midst of that dust he remembered another place like this: a make-shift town, full of filth and rage, where somebody or something had come for his life as this man was coming, except that this other executioner had carried a fire in his head, to burn the flesh away, and all that he, the Gentile, had owned by way of defense was empty hands.

He raised them now. They were as marked as the knife the executioner was carrying, their backs bloodied from his attempt to stem the flow from his nose. He uncurled them, as he'd done many times before, drawing breath as he chose his right over his left and, without understanding why, put it to his mouth.

The pneuma flew before Tolland had time to raise his blade, hitting him on the shoulder with such force he was thrown to the ground. Shock took his voice away for several seconds, then his hand went to his gushing shoulder and he loosed a noise more shriek than roar. The few witnesses who'd remained to watch the killing were rooted to the spot, their eyes not on their fallen lord but on his deposer. Later, when they told this story, they'd all describe what they'd seen in different ways. Some would talk of a knife produced from hiding, used, and concealed again so fast they could barely catch it. Others of a bullet, spat from between the Gentile's teeth. But nobody doubted that something remarkable had taken place in these seconds. A

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wonder worker had appeared among them and laid the tyrant Tolland low without even touching him.

The wounded man wasn't bested so easily, however. Though his blade had gone from his fingers (and been surreptitiously swiped by Monday) he still had his tribe to defend him. He summoned them now,

with wild screeches of rage.

"See what he did? What are you fuckin' waitin' for? Take him! Take the fucker! No one does that to me! Irish? Irish? Where the fuck are you? Somebody help me!"

It was the woman who came to his aid, but he pushed her aside.

"Where the fuck's Irish?"

"I'm here."

"Take hold of the bastard," Tolland said.

Irish didn't move.

"D'you hear me? He used some fuckin' Jew-boy trick on me! You saw him. Some yid trick, it was."

"I saw him," said Irish.

"He'll do it again! He'll do it to you!"

"I don't think he's goin' to do anything to anybody."

"Then break his fuckin' head."

"You can do it if you like," Irish said. "I'm not touchin' him."

Despite his wounding and his bulk, Tolland was up on his feet in seconds, and going at his sometime lieutenant like a bull, but the Gentile's hand was on his shoulder before his fingers could get to the man's throat. He stopped in his tracks, and the spectators had sight of the day's second wonder: fear on Tolland's face. There'd be no ambiguity in their reports of this. When word went out across the city—as it did within the hour, passed from one asylum Tolland had spoiled with blood to another—the account, though embroidered in the telling, was at root the same. Drool had run from Tolland's mouth, it said, and his face had got sweaty. Some said piss ran from the bottom of his trousers and filled his boots.

"Let Irish alone," the Gentile told him. "In fact ... let us all alone."

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Tolland made no reply. He simply looked at the hand laid on him and seemed to shrink. It wasn't his wounding that made him so quiescent, or even fear of the Gentile attacking a second time. He'd sustained injuries far worse than the wound on his shoulder and simply been inflamed to fresh cruelties. It was the touch he shrank from: the Gentile's hand laid lightly on his shoulder. He turned and backed away from his wounder, glancing from side to side as he did so, in the hope that there would be somebody to support him. But everyone, including Irish and Carol, gave him a wide berth.

"You can't do this," he said when he'd put five yards between himself and the Gentile. "I've got friends all over! I'll see you dead, fucker. I will. I'll see you dead!"

The Gentile simply turned his back on this and stooped to claim from the ground the scattered shards of Monday's chalks. This casual gesture was in its way more eloquent than any counter-threat or show of

power, announcing as it did his complete indifference to the other man's presence. Tolland stared at the Gentile's bent back for several seconds, as if calculating the risk of mounting another attack. Then, calculations made, he turned and fled.

"He's gone," said Monday, who was crouching beside the Gentile and watching over his shoulder.

"Do you have any more of these?" the stranger said, rocking the colors in the cradle of his palm.

"No. But I can get some. Do you draw?"

The Gentile stood up. "Sometimes," he said.

"Do you copy stuff, like me?"

"I don't remember."

"I can teach you, if you want."

"No," the Gentile replied. "I'll copy from my head." He looked down at the crayons in his hand. "I can empty it that way."

"Could you be doin' with paint as well?" Irish asked, as the Gentile's gaze went to the gray concrete all around them.

"You could get paint?"

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"Me and Carol here, we can get anything. Whatever you want, Gentile, we'll get it for you."

"Then...I want all the colors you can find." "Is that all? You don't want something to drink?" But the Gentile didn't reply. He was wandering toward the pillar against which Tolland had first pinned him and was applying a color to it. The chalk in his fingers was yellow, and with it he began to draw the circle of the sun.

2

When Jude woke it was almost noon: eleven hours or more since Gentle had come home, relieved her of the egg that had brought her a glimpse of Nirvana, then headed out again into the night. She felt sluggish and pained by the light. Even when she turned the hot water in her shower to a trickle and let it run near cold, it failed to fully waken her. She towed herself half dry and padded through to the kitchen naked. The window was open there, and the breeze brought goose bumps. At least this was some sign of life, she thought, negligible though it was.

She put on some coffee and the television, flipping the channels from one banality to another, then letting it burble along with the percolator while she dressed. The telephonerang while she was looking for her second shoe. There was a din of traffic at the other end of the line, but no voice, and after a couple of seconds the line went dead. She put down the receiver and stayed by the phone, wondering if this was Gentle trying to get through. Thirty seconds later the phonerang again. This time there was a speaker: a man, whose voice was barely more than a ragged whisper.

"For Christ's sake ..."

"Who is this?"

"Oh, Judith ... God, God... Judith? ... It's Oscar...."

"Where are you?" she said. He was very clearly not locked up in his house.

"They're dead, Judith."

"Who are?"

"Now it's me. Now it wants me."

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CLIVE BARKER

"I'm not getting this, Oscar. Who's dead?" "Help me... you've got to help me.... Nowhere's safe." "Come to the Hat then." "No ... you come here...." "Where's here?"

"I'm at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Do you know it?" "What the hell are you doing there?" "I'll be waiting inside. But hurry. It's going to find me. It's going to find me."

The traffic around the square was locked, as was often the case at noon, the breeze that had brought gooseflesh an hour before too meek to disperse the fog of countless exhausts and the fumes of as many frustrated drivers. Nor was the air inside the church any less stale, though it was pure ozone beside the smell of fear that came off the man sitting close to the altar, his thick hands knitted so tightly the bone of his knuckles showed through the fat.

"I thought you said you weren't going to leave the house," she reminded him.

"Something came for me," Oscar said, his eyes wide. "In the middle of the night. It tried to get in, but it couldn't. Then this morning—in broad daylight—I heard the parrots kicking up a din, and the back door was blown off its hinges."

"Did you see what it was?"

"Do you think I'd be here if I had? No; I was ready, after the first time. As soon as I heard the birds I ran for the front door. Then this terrible din, and all the lights went out...."

He divided his hands and took light hold of her arm.

"What am I going to do?" he said. "It'll find me, sooner or later. It's killed all the rest of them—"

"Who?"

"Haven't you seen the headlines? They're all dead. Lionel, McGann, Bloxham. Even the ladies. Shales was in his bed. Cut up in pieces in his own bed, I ask you, what kind of creature does that?"

"A quiet one."

"How can you joke?"

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"I joke, you sweat. We deal with it the best way we know how." She sighed. "You're a better man than this, Oscar. You shouldn't be hiding away. There's work to do."

"Don't tell me about your damn Goddess, Judith. It's a lost cause. The tower'll be rubble by now."

"If there's any help for us," she said, "it's there. I know it. Come with me, won't you? I've seen you brave. What's happened to you?"

"I don't know," he said. "I wish I did. All these years I've been crossing over to Yzordderrex, not giving a damn where I put my nose, not caring whether I was at risk or not, as long as there were new sights to see. It was another world. Maybe another me, too."

"And here?"

He made a baffled face. "This is England," he said. "Safe, rainy, boring England, where the cricket's bad and the beer's warm. This isn't supposed to be a dangerous place."

"But it is, Oscar, whether we like it or not. There's a darkness here worse than anything in Yzordderrex. And it's got your scent. There's no escaping that. It's coming after you. And me, for all I know."

"But why?"

"Maybe it thinks you can do it some harm."

"What can I do? I don't know a damn thing."

"But we could learn," she said. "That way, if we're going to die, at least it won't be in ignorance."

12

despite Oscar's prediction, the Tabula Rasa's tower was still standing, any trace of distinction it might have once owned eroded by the sun, which blazed with noontday fervor at well past three. Its ferocity had taken its toll on the trees that shielded the tower from the road, leaving their leaves to hang like dishrags from their branches. If there were any birds taking cover in the foliage, they were too exhausted to sing.

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CLIVE BARKER

"When were you last here?" Oscar asked Jude as they drove into the empty forecourt.

She told him about her encounter with Bloxham, squeezing the account for its humorous effect in the hope of distracting Oscar from his anxiety.

"I never much liked Bloxham," Oscar replied. "He was so damn full of himself. Mind you, so were we all...." His voice trailed away, and with all the enthusiasm of a man approaching the execution block, he

got out of the car and led her to the front door.

"There's no alarms ringing," he said. "If there's anybody inside, they got in with a key."

He'd pulled a cluster of his own keys out of his pocket and selected one.

"Are you sure this is wise?" he asked her.

"Yes, I am."

Resigned to this insanity, he unlocked the door and, after a moment's hesitation, headed inside. The foyer was cold and gloomy, but the chill only served to make Jude brisk.

"How do we get down into the cellar?" she said.

"You want to go straight down there?" he replied. "Shouldn't we check upstairs first? Somebody could be here."

"Somebody *is* here, Oscar. She's in the cellar. You can check upstairs if you want to, but I'm going down. The less time we waste the sooner we're out of here."

It was a persuasive argument, and he conceded to it with a little nod. He dutifully fished through the bunch of keys a second time and, having chosen one, went over to the farthest and smallest of the three closed doors ahead. Having taken his time selecting the right key, he now took even longer to get it into the lock and coax it into turning.

"How often have you been down there?" she asked him while he worked.

"Only twice," he replied. "It's a pretty grim place."

"I know," she reminded him.

"On the other hand, my father seemed to make quite a habit of exploring down there. There's rules and regulations, you know, about nobody looking through the library

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on their own, in case they're tempted by something they read. I'm sure he flouted all that. Ah!" The key turned. "That's one of them!" He selected a second key and started on the other lock.

"Did your father talk to you about the cellar?" she asked him.

"Once or twice. He knew more about the Dominion than he should have done. I think he even knew a few feits. I can't be sure. He was a cagey bugger. But at the end, when he was delirious, he'd mutter these names. *Patashoqua*, I remember. He repeated that over and over."

"Do you think he ever crossed into the Dominions?"

"I doubt it."

"So you worked out how to do that on your own?"

"I found a few books down here and smuggled them out. It wasn't difficult to get the circle working. Magic doesn't decay. It's about the only thing"—he paused, grunted, forced the key—"that doesn't." It began to turn, but not all the way. "I think Papa would have liked Patashoqua," he went on. "But it was only a name to him, poor sod."

"It'll be different after the Reconciliation," Jude said. "I know it's too late for him—"

"On the contrary," Oscar said, grimacing as he bullied the key. "From what I hear, the dead are just as locked up as the rest of us. There's spirits everywhere, according to Peccable, ranting and raving."

"Even in here?"

"Especially in here," he said.

With that, the lock gave up its resistance, and the key turned.

"There," he said. "Just like magic."

"Wonderful." She patted his back. "You're a genius."

He grinned at her. The dour, defeated man she'd found sweating in the pews an hour ago had lightened considerably now there was something to distract him from his death sentence. He withdrew the key from the lock and turned the handle. The door was stout and heavy, but it opened without much resistance. He preceded her into the darkness.

"If I remember right," he said, "there's a light here."

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No?" He patted the wall to the side of the door. "Ah! Wait!"

A switch flipped, and a row of bare bulbs, strung from a cable, illuminated the room. It was large, wood-paneled, and austere.

"This is the one part of Roxborough's house still intact, besides the cellar." There was a plain oak table in the middle of the room, with several chairs around it, "This is where they met, apparently: the first Tabula Rasa. And they kept meeting here, over the years, until the house was demolished."

"Which was when?"

"In the late twenties."

"So a hundred and fifty years of Godolphin bums sat on one of those seats?"

"That's right."

"Including Joshua."

"Presumably."

"I wonder how many of them I knew?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I wish I did. I'm still waiting for the memories to come back. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder if they ever will."

"Maybe you're repressing them for a reason?"

"Why? Because they're so appalling I can't face them? Because I acted like a whore; let myself be passed around the table with the port, left to right? No, I don't think that's it at all. I can't remember because I wasn't really living. I was sleepwalking, and nobody wanted to wake me."

She looked up at him, almost defying him to defend his family's ownership of her. He said nothing, of course. Instead, he moved to the vast grate, ducking beneath the man's telpiece, selecting a third key as he went. She heard him slot it in the lock and turn it, heard the motion of cogs and counterweights its turning initiated, and, finally, heard the groan of the concealed door as it opened. He glanced back at her.

"Are you coming?" he said. "Be careful. The steps are steep."

The flight was not only steep but long. What little light spilled from the room above dwindled after half a dozen

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steps, and she descended twice that number in darkness before Oscar found a switch below, and lights ran off along the labyrinth. A sense of triumph ran through her. She'd put her desire to find a way into this underworld aside many times since the dream of the blue eye had brought her to Celestine's cell, but it had never died. Now, finally, she was going to walk where her dream sight had gone, through this mine of books with its seams to the ceiling, to the place where the Goddess lay.

"This is the single largest collection of sacred texts since the library at Alexandria," Oscar said, his museum-guide tone a defense, she suspected, against the sense of moment she shared with her. "There are books here even the Vatican doesn't know exist." He lowered his voice, as though there might be other browsers here that he'd disturb if he spoke too loudly. "The night he died, Papa told me he found a book here written by the Fourth King."

"The what?"

"There were three kings at Bethlehem, remember? According to the Gospels. But the Gospels lied. There were four. They were looking for the Reconciler."

"Christ was a Reconciler?"

"So Papa said."

"And you believe that?"

"Papa had no reason to lie."

"But the book, Oscar; the book could have lied."

"So could the Bible. Papa said this Magi wrote his story because he knew he'd been cut out of the Gospels. It was this fellow named the Imajica. Wrote the word down in this book. There it was on the page for the first time in history. Papa said he wept."

Jude surveyed the labyrinth that spread from the foot of the stairs with fresh respect. "Have you tried to find the book since?"

"I didn't need to. When Papa died I went in search of the real thing. I traveled back and forth as though Christos had succeeded and the Fifth was reconciled. And there they were, the Unbeheld's many mansions."

And there, too, the most enigmatic player in this inter-

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Dominional drama: Hapexamendios. If Christos was a Reconciler, did that make the Unbeheld Christos' Father? Was the force in hiding behind the fogs of the First Dominion the Lord of Lords, and, if so, why had He crushed every Goddess across the Imajica, as legend said He had? One question begged another, all from a few claims made by a man who'd knelt at the Nativity. No wonder Roxborough had buried these books alive.

"Do you know where your mystery woman's lurking?" Oscar said.

"Not really."

"Then we've got a hell of a search on our hands,"

"I remember there was a couple making love down here, near her cell. One of them was Bloxham."

"Dirty little bugger. So we should be looking for some stains on the floor, is that it? I suggest we split up, or we'll be here all summer."

They parted at the stairs and made their separate ways. Jude soon discovered how strangely sound carried in the tunnels. Sometimes she could hear Godolphin's footsteps so clearly she thought he must be following her. Then she'd turn a corner (or else he would) and the noise would not simply fade but vanish altogether, leaving only the pad of her own soles on the cold stone to keep her company. They were buried too deeply for even the remotest murmur from the street above to penetrate, nor was there any suspicion of sound from the earth around them: no hum of cables; no sluicing of drains.

She was several times tempted to pluck one of the tomes from its shelf, thinking perhaps serendipity would put her in reach of the diary of the Fourth King. But she resisted, knowing that even if she had time to browse here, which she didn't, the volumes were written in the great languages of theology and philosophy: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, all incomprehensible to her. As ever on this journey, she'd have to beat a track to the truth by instinct and witalone. Nothing had been given to her to illuminate the way except the blue eye, and that was in Gentle's possession now. She'd reclaim it as soon as she saw him again, give him

something else as a talisman: the hair of her sex, if that's what he wanted. But not her egg; not her cool blue egg.

Maybe it was these thoughts that ushered her to the place where the lovers had stood; maybe it was that same serendipity she'd hoped might lead her hand to the King's book. If so, this was a finer leading. Here was the wall where Bloxham and his mistress had coupled; she knew it without a trace of doubt. Here were the shelves the woman had clung to while her ridiculous beau had labored to fulfill her. Between the books they bore, the mortar was tinged with the faintest trace of blue. She didn't call Oscar but went to the shelves and took down several armfuls of books, then put her fingers to the stains. The wall was bitterly cold, but the mortar crumbled beneath her touch, as though her sweat was sufficient agent to unbind its elements. She was shocked at what she'd caused, and gratified, retreating from the wall as the message of dissolution spread with extraordinary rapidity. The mortar began to run from between the bricks like the finest of sand, its trickle becoming a torrent in seconds.

"I'm here," she told the prisoner behind the wall. "God knows, I've taken my time. But I'm here."

Oscar didn't catch Jude's words, not even the remotest echo. His attention had been claimed two or three minutes before by a sound from overhead, and he'd climbed the stairs in pursuit of its source. He'd disgraced his manhood enough in the last few days, hiding himself away like a frightened widow, and the thought that he might reclaim some of the respect he'd lost in Jude's eyes by confronting the trespasser above gave purpose to the chase. He'd armed himself with a piece of timber he'd found at the bottom of the stairs and was almost *hoping* as he went that his ears weren't playing tricks on him, and that there was indeed something tangible up above. He was sick of being in fear of rumors, and of pictures half glimpsed in flying stones. If there was something to see, he wanted to see it and either be damned in the seeing or cured of fear.

At the top of the stairs he hesitated. The light spilling

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through the door from Roxborough's room was moving, very slightly. He took his bludgeon in both hands and stepped through the door. The room swung with the lights, the solid table and its solid chairs giddied by the motion. He surveyed the room from corner to corner. Finding every shadow empty, he moved towards the door that led out into the foyer, as delicately as his bulk allowed. The rocking of the lights settled as he went, and they were still by the time he reached the door. As he stepped outside a perfume caught his nostrils, as sweet as the sudden, sharp pain in his side was sour. He tried to turn but his attacker dug a second time. The timber went from his hand, and a shout came from his lips....

"Oscar?"

She didn't want to leave the wall of Celestine's cell when it was undoing itself with such gusto—the bricks were dropping onto each other as the mortar between them decayed, and the shelves were creaking, ready to fall—but Oscar's shout demanded her attention. She headed back through the maze, the sound of the wall's capitulation echoing through the passageways, confounding her. But she found her way back to the stairs after a time, yelling for Oscar as she went. There was no reply from the library itself, so she decided to climb back up into the meeting room. That too was silent and empty, as was the foyer when she got to it, the only sign that Oscar had passed through a block of wood lying close to the door. What the hell was he up to? She went out to see if he'd returned to the car for some reason, but there was no sign of him in the sun, which narrowed the options to one: the tower above.

Irritated, but a little anxious now, she looked towards the open door that led back into the cellar, torn between returning to welcome Celestine and following Oscar up the tower. A man of his bulk was perfectly capable of defending himself, she reasoned, but she couldn't help but feel some residue of responsibility, given that she'd cajoled him into coming here in the first place.

One of the doors looked to be a lift, but when she ap-

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preached she heard the hum of its motor in action, so rather than wait she went to the stairs and began to climb. Though the flight was in darkness, she didn't let that slow her but mounted the stairs three and four at a time until she reached the door that led out onto the top floor. As she groped for the handle she heard a voice from the suite beyond. The words were indecipherable, but the voice sounded cultivated, almost clipped. Had one of the Tabula Rasa survived after all? Bloxham, perhaps, the Casanova of the cellar?

She pushed the door open. It was brighter on the other side, though not by that much. All the rooms along the corridor were murky pits, their drapes drawn. But the voice led her on through the gloom towards a pair of doors, one of which was ajar. A light was burning on the other side. She approached with caution, the carpet underfoot lush enough to silence her tread. Even when the speaker broke off from his monologue for a few moments she continued to advance, reaching the suite without a sound. There was little purpose in delay, she thought, once she was at the threshold. Without a word, she pushed open the door.

There was a table in the room, and on it lay Oscar, in a double pool: one of light, the other of blood. She didn't scream, or even sicken, even though he was laid open like a patient in mid-surgery. Her thoughts flew past the horror to the man and his agonies. He was alive. She could see his heart beating like a fish in a red pool, gasping its last.

The surgeon's knife had been cast onto the table beside him, and its owner, who was presently concealed by shadow, said, "There you are. Come in, why don't you? Come in." He put his hands, which were clean, on the table. "It's only me, lovey."

"Dowd...."

"Ah! To be remembered. It seems such a little thing, doesn't it? But it's not. Really, it's not."

The old theatricality was still in his manner, but the melodramatic quality had gone from his voice. He sounded, and indeed looked, like a parody of himself, his face a mask carved by a hack.

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"Do join us, lovey," he said. "We're in this together, after all."

Startled as she was to see him (though hadn't Oscar warned her that his type was difficult to kill?) she didn't feel intimidated by him. She'd seen his tricks and deceits and performances; she'd seen him hanging over an abyss, begging for life. He was ridiculous.

"I wouldn't touch Godolphin, by the way," he said.

She ignored the advice and went to the table.

"His life's hanging by a thread," Dowd went on. "If he's moved, I swear his innards will just drop out. My advice is let him lie. Enjoy the moment."

"Enjoy?" she said, the revulsion she felt surfacing, though she knew it was exactly what the bastard wanted to hear.

"Not so loud, sweetie," Dowd said, as if pained by her volume. "You'll wake the baby." He chuckled. "He *is* a baby, really, compared to us. Such a little life...."

"Why did you do this?"

"Where do I begin? With the petty reasons? No. With the big one. I did it to be free." He leaned in towards her, his face a chiaroscuro jigsaw beneath the lamp. "When he breathes his last, lovey—which 'H' be very soon now—that's the end of the Godolphins. When he's gone, we're in thrall to nobody."

"You were free in Yzordderex."

"No. On a long leash, maybe, but never free. I felt his desires, I felt his discomforts. A little part of me knew I should be at home with him, making his tea and drying between his toes. In my heart, I was still his slave." He looked at the body again. "It seems almost miraculous, how he manages to linger."

He reached for the knife.

"Leave him!" she snapped, and he retreated with surprising alacrity.

She leaned towards Oscar, afraid to touch him for fear of shocking his traumatized system further and stopping it. There were tics in his face, and his white lips were full of tiny tremors.

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"Oscar?" she murmured. "Can you hear me?"

"Oh, look at you, lovey," Dowd cooed. "Getting all doe-eyed over him. Remember how he *used* you. How he *op?* pressed you."

She leaned closer to Oscar and said his name again.

"He never loved either of us," Dowd went on. "We were his goods and chattels. Part of his..."

Oscar's eyes flickered open.

". . . inheritance," Dowd said, but the word was barely audible. As the eyes opened, Dowd retreated a second step, covering himself in shadow.

Oscar's white lips shaped the syllables of Judith's name, but there was no sound to accompany the motion.

"Oh, God," she murmured, "can you hear me? I want you to know this wasn't all for nothing. I found her."

Do you understand? I found her."

Oscar made a tiny nod, then, with agonizing delicacy, ran his tongue over his lips and drew enough breath to say, "It wasn't true...."

She caught the words, but not their sense. "What wasn't true?" she said.

He licked again, his face knotting up with the effort of speech. This time there was only one word: "Inheritance. ..."

"Not an inheritance?" she said. "I know that."

He made the very tiniest smile, his gaze going over her face from brow to cheek, from cheek to lips, then back to her eyes, meeting them unabashed.

"I... loved ... you," he said.

"I know that too," she whispered.

Then his gaze lost its clarity. His heart stopped beating in its bloody pool; the knots on his face slipped with its cessation. He was gone. The last of the Godolphins, dead on the Tabula Rasa's table.

She stood upright, staring at the cadaver, though it distressed her to do so. If she was ever tempted to toy with darkness, let this sight be a scourge to that temptation. There was nothing poetic or noble in this scene, only waste.

"So there it is," Dowd said. "Funny. I don't feel any dif-

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ferent. It may take time, of course. I suppose freedom has to be learned, like anything else." She could hear desperation beneath this babble, barely concealed. He was in pain. "You should know something," he said.

"I don't want to hear."

"No, listen, lovey, I want you to know.... He did exactly this to me, on this very table. He gutted me in front of the Society. Maybe it's a petty thing, wanting revenge, but then I'm just an actor chappie. What do I know?"

"You killed them all for that?"

"Who?"

"The Society."

"No, not yet. But I'll get to them. For us both."

"You're too late. They're already dead."

This hushed him for fully fifteen seconds. When he began again, it was more chatter, as empty as the

silence he wanted to fill.

"It was that damn purge, you know; they made themselves too many enemies. There's going to be a lot of minor Maestros crawling out of the woodwork in the next few days. It's quite an anniversary, isn't it? I'm going to get stinking drunk. What about you? How will you celebrate, alone or with friends? This woman you found, for instance. Is she the partying type?"

Jude silently cursed her indiscretion.

"Who is she?" Dowd went on. "Don't tell me Clara had a sister." He laughed. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but she was crazy as a coot; you must see that now. She didn't understand you. Nobody understands you but me, lovey, and I understand you—"

"—because we're the same."

"Exactly. We don't belong to anybody any more. We're our own inventions. We'll do what we want, when we want, and we won't give a fuck for the consequences."

"Is that freedom?" she said flatly, finally taking her eyes off Oscar and looking up at Dowd's misshapen form.

"Don't try and tell me you don't want it," Dowd said. "I'm not asking you to love me for this, I'm not that stupid, but at least admit it was *just*."

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"Why didn't you murder him in his bed years ago?"

"I wasn't strong enough. Oh, I realize I may not radiate health and efficiency just at the moment, but I've changed a lot since we last met. I've been down among the dead. It was very ... educational. And while I was down there, it began to rain. Such a *hard* rain, lovey, let me tell you. I never saw its like before. You want to see what fell on me?"

He pulled up his sleeve and put his arm into the pool of light. Here was the reason for his lumpen appearance. His arm, and presumably his entire body, was a patchwork, with the flesh half sealed over fragments of stone which he'd slid into his wounds. She instantly recognized the iridescence that ran in the fragments, lending their glamour to his wretched meat. The rain that had fallen on his head was the sloughings of the Pivot.

"You know what it is, don't you?"

She hated the ease with which he read her face, but there was no use denying what she knew.

"Yes, I do," she said. "I was in the tower when it started to collapse."

"What a Godsend, eh? It makes me slow, of course, carrying this kind of weight, but after today I won't be fetching and carrying, so what do I care if it takes me half an hour to cross the room? I've got power in me, lovey, and I don't mind sharing—"

He stopped and withdrew his arm from the light.

"What was that?"

She'd heard nothing, but she did now: a distant rumbling from below.

"Whatever were you up to down there? Not destroying the library, I hope. I wanted that satisfaction for myself. Oh, dear. Well, there'll be plenty of other chances to play the barbarian. It's in the air, don't you think?"

Jude's thoughts went to Celestine. Dowd was perfectly capable of doing her harm. She had to go back down and warn the Goddess, perhaps find some means of defense. In the meantime, she'd play along.

"Where will you go after this?" she asked Dowd, lightening her tone as best she could.

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"Back to Regent's Park Road, I thought. We can sleep in our master's bed. Oh, what am I saying? Please don't think I want your body. I know the rest of the world thinks heaven's in your lap, but I've been celibate for two hundred years and I've completely lost the urge. We can live as brother and sister, can't we? That doesn't sound so bad, now, does it?"

"No," she said, fighting the urge to spit her disgust in his face. "No, it doesn't."

"Well, look, why don't you wait for me downstairs? I've got a bit of business left to do here. Rituals have to be observed."

"Whatever you say," she replied.

She left him to his farewells, whatever they were, and headed back to the stairs. The rumbling that had caught his attention had ceased, but she hurried down the concrete flight with high hopes. The cell was open, she knew it. In a matter of moments she'd set her eyes on the Goddess and, perhaps as importantly, Celestine would set her eyes on Jude. In one sense, what Dowd had expressed above was true. With Oscar dead, she was indeed free from the curse of her creation. It was time to know herself and be known.

As she walked through the remaining room of Roxborough's house and started down the stairs into the cellar, she sensed the change that had come over the maze below. She didn't have to search for the cell; the energy in the air moved like an invisible tide, carrying her towards its source. And there it was, in front of her: the cell wall a heap of splinters and rubble, the gap its collapse had made rising to the ceiling. The dissolution she'd initiated was still going on. Even as she approached, further bricks fell away, their mortar turned to dust. She braved the fall, clambering up over the wreckage to peer into the cell. It was dark inside, but her eyes soon found the mummified form of the prisoner, lying in the dirt.

There was no movement in the body whatsoever. She went to it and fell to her knees to tear at the fine threads that Roxborough or his agents had bound Celestine with. They were too tough for her fingers, so she went at them

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with her teeth. The threads were bitter, but her teeth were sharp, and once one succumbed to her bites

others quickly followed. A tremor passed through the body, as if the captive sensed liberation. As with the bricks, the message of unmaking was contagious, and she'd only snapped half a dozen of the threads when they began to stretch and break of their own volition, aided by the motion of the body they'd bound. Her cheek was stung by the flight of one, and she was obliged to retreat as the unfettering spread, the threads describing sinuous motions as they broke, their severed ends bright.

The tremors in Celestine's body were now convulsions, growing as the ambition of the threads increased. They weren't simply flying wildly, Jude realized; they were reaching out in all directions, up towards the ceiling of the cell and to its walls. Stung by them once, the only way she could avoid further contact was by backing away to the hole through which she'd come and then out, stumbling over the rubble.

As she emerged she heard Dowd's voice, somewhere in the labyrinth behind her. "What have you been doing, lovey?"

She wasn't quite sure, was the truth. Though she'd been the initiator of this unbinding, she wasn't its mistress. The cords had an urgency of their own, and whether it was Celestine who moved them, or Roxborough who'd plaited into them the instruction to destroy anyone who came seeking his prisoner's release, they were not about to be placated or contained. Some were snatching at the edge of the hole, dragging away more of the bricks. Others, demonstrating an elasticity she hadn't expected, were nosing over the rubble, turning over stones and books as they advanced.

"Oh, my Lord," she heard Dowd say, and turned to see him standing in the passageway half a dozen yards behind her, with his surgeon's knife in one hand and a bloody handkerchief in the other.

This was the first sight she had of him head to foot, and the burden of Pivot shards he carried was apparent. He looked utterly maladroit, his shoulders mismatched and his

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left leg turned inward, as though a shattered bone had been badly set.

"What's in there?" he said, hobbling towards her. "Is this your friend?"

"I suggest you keep your distance," she said.

He ignored her. "Did Roxborough wall something up? Look at those things! Is it an Oviate?"

"No."

"What then? Godolphin never told me about this."

"He didn't know."

"But you did?" he said, glancing back at her as he advanced to study the cords, which were emerging all the time. "I'm impressed. We've both kept our little secrets, haven't we?"

One of the cords reared suddenly from the rubble, and he jumped back, the handkerchief dropping from his hand. It unfolded as it fell, and the piece of Oscar's flesh Dowd had wrapped in it landed in the dirt. It was vestigial, but she knew it well enough. He'd cut off the curiosity and carried it away as a keepsake.

She let out a moan of disgust. Dowd started to stoop to pick it up, but her rage—which she'd concealed

for Celestine's sake—erupted.

"You scumbag!" she said, and went at him with both hands raised above her head, locked into a single fist.

He was heavy with shards and couldn't rise fast enough to avoid her blow. She struck the back of his neck, a blow that probably hurt her more than him, but unbalanced a body already too asymmetrical for its own good. He stumbled, prey to gravity, and sprawled in the rubble. He knew his indignity, and it enraged him.

"Stupid cow!" he said. "Stupid, sentimental cow! Pick it up! Go on, pick it up! Have it if you want to."

"I don't want it."

"No, I *insist* It's a gift, brother to sister."

"I'm not your sister! I never was and I never will be!"

Mites were appearing from his mouth as he lay on the rubble, some of them grown fat as cockroaches on the power he carried in his skin. Whether they were for her ben-

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efit or to protect him against the presence in the wall she didn't know, but seeing them she took a step away from him.

"I'm going to forgive you this," he said, all magnanimity. "You're overwrought, I know." He raised his arm. "Help me up," he said. "Tell me you're sorry, and it's forgotten."

"I loathe everything you are," she said.

Despite the mites, it was self-preservation that made her speak, not courage. This was a place of power. The truth would serve her better here than a lie, however politic.

He withdrew his arm and started to haul himself up. As he did so she took two steps forward and, picking up the bloodied handkerchief, claimed with it the last of Oscar. As she stood up again, almost guilty at what she'd done, she caught sight of a motion in the wall. A pale form had appeared against the darkness of the cell, as ripe and rounded a form as the wall that framed it was ragged. Celestine was floating, or rather was borne up as Quai-soir had been borne up, on ribbons of flesh, the filaments that had once smothered her clinging to her limbs like the remnants of a coat and draped around her head as a living hood. The face beneath was delicately boned, but severe, and what beauty it might have possessed was spoiled by the dementia that burned in it. Dowd was still in the process of rising and turned to follow Jude's astonished gaze. When he set eyes on the apparition his body failed him, and he fell back onto the rubble, belly down. From his mite-spawning mouth came one terrified word.

"Celestine?"

The woman had approached the limits of her cell and now raised her hands to touch the bricks that had sealed her in for so long. Though she merely brushed them, they seemed to flee her fingers, tumbling down to join the rest. There was ample room for her to emerge, but she hung back and spoke from the

shadows, her pupils flicking back and forth maniacally, her lips curling back from her teeth as though in rehearsal for some ghastly revelation. She matched Dowd's single utterance with a word of her own: "Dowd."

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"Yes ..." he murmured, "it's me," "So he'd been honest in some part of his biography at least, Jude thought. She knew him, just as he'd claimed to know her.

"Who did this to you?" he said.

"Why ask me," Celestine said, "when you were part of the plot?" In her voice was the same mingling of lunacy and composure her body exhibited, her mellifluous tones accompanied by a fluttering that was almost a second voice, speaking in tandem with the first.

"I didn't know, I swear," Dowd said. He craned his heavy head to appeal to Jude. "Tell her," he said.

Celestine's oscillating gaze rose to Jude. "You?" she said. "Did you conspire against me?"

"No," Jude said. "I'm the one who freed you."

"I freed myself."

"But I began it," Jude said.

"Come closer. Let me see you better."

Jude hesitated to approach, with Dowd's face still a nest of mites. But Celestine made her demand again, and Jude obeyed. The woman raised her head as she approached, turning it this way and that, perhaps to coax her torpid muscles back into life.

"Are you Roxborough's woman?" she said.

"No."

"That's close enough," she told Jude. "Who's then? Which one of them do you belong to?"

"I don't belong to any of them," Jude said. "They're all dead."

"Even Roxborough?"

"He's been gone two hundred years."

At last the eyes stopped flickering, and their stillness, now it came, was more distressing than their motion. She had a gaze that could slice steel.

"Two hundred years," she said. It wasn't a question, it was an accusation. And it wasn't Jude she was accusing, it was Dowd. "Why didn't you come for me?"

"I thought you were dead and gone," he told her.

"Dead? No. That would have been a kindness. I bore Hirsch. I raised it for a time. You knew this."

"How could I? It was none of my business."

"You *made* me your business," she said. "The day you took me from my life and gave me to God. I didn't ask for that, and I didn't want it—"

"I was just a servant."

"Dog, more like. Who's got your leash now? This woman?"

"I serve nobody."

"Good. Then you can serve me."

"Don't trust him," Jude said.

"Who, would you prefer I trust?" Celestine replied, not deigning to look at Jude. "You? I don't think so. You've got blood on your hands, and you smell of coitus."

These last words were tinged with such disgust Jude couldn't stem her retort. "You wouldn't be awake if I hadn't found you."

"Consider your freedom to go from this place my thanks," Celestine replied. "You wouldn't wish to know my company for very long."

Jude didn't find that difficult to believe. After all the months she'd waited for this meeting, there were no revelations to be had here: only Celestine's insanity and the ice of her rage.

Dowd, meanwhile, was getting to his feet. As he did so, one of the woman's ribbons unfurled itself from the shadows and reached towards him. Despite his earlier protests, he made no attempt to avoid it. A suspicious air of humility had come over him. Not only did he put up no resistance, he actually proffered his hands to Celestine for binding, placing them pulse to pulse. She didn't scorn his offer. The ribbon of her flesh wrapped itself around his wrists, then tightened, tugging at him to haul him up the incline of brick.

"Be careful," Jude warned her. "He's stronger than he looks."

"It's all stolen," Celestine replied, "His tricks, his deceptions, his power. None of it belongs to him. He's an actor. Aren't you?"

As if in acquiescence, Dowd bowed his head. But as he did so he dug his heels into the rubble and refused to be drawn any further. Jude started to voice a second warning; but before it was out of her mouth, his fingers closed around the flesh and pulled hard. Caught unawares, Celestine was dragged against the raw edge of the hole, and before the rest of her filaments could come to her aid Dowd had raised his wrists above his head and casually snapped the flesh that bound them. Celestine let out a howl of pain and retreated into the sanctuary of her cell, trailing the severed ribbon.

Dowd gave her no respite, however, but went in instant pursuit, yelling to her as he shambled up over the heaped rubble, "I'm not your slave! I'm not your dog! And you're no fucking Goddess! You're a whore!"

Then he was gone into the darkness of the cell, roaring. Jude ventured a few steps closer to the hole, but the combatants had retreated into its recesses, and she saw nothing of their struggle. She heard it, however: the hiss of breath expelled in pain; the sound of bodies pitched against the stone. The walls shook, and books all along the passageway were thrown from their shelves, the tide of power snatching loose sheets and pamphlets up into the air like birds in a hurricane, leaving the heavier tomes to thrash on the ground, broken-backed.

And then, suddenly, it was over. The commotion in the cell ceased utterly, and there were several seconds of motionless hush, broken by a moan and the sight of a hand reaching out of the murk to clutch at the broken wall. A moment later Dowd stumbled into view, his other hand clamped to his face. Though the shards he carried were powerful, the flesh they were seated in was weak, and Celestine had exploited that frailty with the efficiency of a warrior. Half his face was missing, stripped to the bone, and his body was more unknitted than the corpse he'd left on the table above: his abdomen gaping, his limbs battered.

He fell as he emerged. Rather than attempting to get to his feet—which she doubted he was capable of doing—he crawled over the rubble like a blind man, his hands feeling out the wreckage ahead. Sobs came from him now and then,

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and whimpers, but the effort of escape was quickly consuming what little strength he had, and before he reached clear ground his noises gave out. So, a little time after, did he. His arms folded beneath him, and he collapsed, face to the floor, surrounded by twitching books.

Jude watched his body for a count of ten, then moved back towards the cell. As she came within two yards of his body, she saw a motion and froze in her tracks. There was life in him still, though it wasn't his. The mites were exiting his open mouth, like fleas hastening from a cooling host. They came from his nostrils, too, and from his ears. Without his will to direct them they were probably harmless, but she wasn't going to test that notion. She stepped as wide of them as she could, taking an indirect route up over the rubble to the threshold of Celestine's asylum.

The shadows were much thickened by the dust that danced in the air, an aftermath of the forces that had been unleashed inside. But Celestine was visible, lying crookedly against the far wall. He'd done her harm, no doubt of that. Her pale skin was seared and ruptured at thigh, flank, and shoulder. Roxborough's purgative zeal still had some jurisdiction in his tower, Jude thought. She'd seen three apostates laid low in the space of an hour one above and two below:

Of them all, his prisoner Celestine seemed to have suffered least. Wounded though she was, she still had the will to turn her fierce eyes in Jude's direction and say, "Have you come to crow?"

"I tried to warn you," Jude said. "I don't want us to be enemies, Celestine. I want to help you."

"On whose command?"

"On my own. Why'd you assume everybody's a slave or a whore or somebody's damn dog?"

"Because that's the way the world is," she said.

"It's changed, Celestine."

"What? Are the humans gone then?"

"It's not human to be a slave."

"What would you know?" the woman said. "I don't sniff

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much humanity in you. You're some kind of pretender, aren't you? Made by a Maestro."

It would have pained Jude to hear such dismissal from any source, but from this woman, who'd been for so long a beacon of hope and healing, it was the bitterest condemnation. She'd fought so hard to be more than a fake, forged in a manmade womb. But with a few words Celestine had reduced her to a mirage.

"You're not even natural," she said.

"Nor are you," Jude snapped back.

"But I was once," Celestine said. "And I cling to that."

"Cling all you like, it won't change the facts. No natural woman could have survived in here for two centuries."

"I had my revenge to nourish me."

"On Roxborough?"

"On them all, all except one."

"Who?"

"The Maestro... Sartori."

"You knew him?"

"Too little," Celestine said.

There was a weight of sorrow here Jude didn't comprehend, but she had the means to ameliorate it on her tongue, and for all Celestine's cruelties Jude wasn't about to withhold the news.

"Sartori isn't dead," she said.

Celestine had turned her face to the wall, but now looked back at Jude. "Not dead?"

"I'll find him for you if you want," Jude said.

"You'd do that?"

"Yes."

"Are you his mistress?"

"Not exactly."

"Where is he? Is he near?"

"I don't know where he is. Somewhere in the city."

"Yes. Fetch him. Please, fetch him." She hauled herself up the wall. "He doesn't know my name, but I know him."

"So who shall I tell him you are?"

"Ask him ... ask him if he remembers Nisi Nirvana."

"Who?"

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"Just tell him."

"Nisi Nirvana?"

"That's right."

Jude stood up and returned to the hole in the wall, but as she was about to step out Celestine recalled her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Judith." -

"Well, Judith, not only do you stink of coitus, but you have in your hand some piece of flesh which you haven't given up clutching. Whatever it is, let it go."

Appalled, Jude looked down at her hand. The curiosity was still in her possession, half hanging from her fist. She pitched it away, into the dust.

"Do you wonder I took you for a whore?" Celestine remarked.

"Then we've both made mistakes," Jude replied, looking back at her. "I thought you were my salvation."

"Yours was the greater error," Celestine replied.

Jude didn't grace this last piece of spite with a reply but headed out of the cell. The mites that had exited

Dowd's body were still crawling around aimlessly, looking for a new bolthole, but the flesh they'd vacated had upped and gone. She wasn't altogether surprised. Dowd was an actor to his core. He would postpone his farewell scene as long as possible, in the hope that he'd be at center stage when the final curtain fell. A hopeless ambition, given the fame of his fellow players, and one Jude wasn't foolish enough to share. The more she learned about the drama unfolding around her, with its roots in the tale of Christ the Reconciler, the more resigned she was to having little or no role in it. Like the Fourth Magi, expunged from the Nativity, she wasn't wanted in the Gospel about to be written; and having seen the pitiful place a king's testament had come to, she was not about to waste time writing her own.

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I

Clem's duties were done for the night. He'd been out since seven the previous evening, about the same business that took him out every night: the shepherding of those among the city's homeless too frail or too young to survive long on its streets with only concrete and cardboard for a bed. Midsummer Night was only two days away, and the hours of darkness were short and relatively balmy, but there were other stalkers besides the cold that preyed on the weak—all human—and the work of denying them their quarry took him through the empty hours after midnight and left him, as now, exhausted, but too full of feeling to lay down his head and sleep. He'd seen more human misery in the three months he'd been working with the homeless than in the four decades preceding that. People living in the extremes of deprivation within spitting distance of the city's most conspicuous symbols of justice, faith, and democracy: without money, without hope, and many (these the saddest) without much left of their sanity. When he returned home after these nightly treks, the hole left in him by Taylor's passing not filled but at least forgotten for a while, it was with expressions of such despair in his head that his own, met in the mirror, seemed almost blithe.

Tonight, however, he lingered in the dark city longer than usual. Once the sun was up he knew he'd have little or no chance of sleeping, but sleep was of little consequence to him at the moment. It was two days since he'd had the visitation that had sent him to Judy's doorstep with tales of angels, and since then there'd been no further hint of Taylor's presence. But there were other hints, not in the house but out here in the streets, that powers were abroad which his dear Taylor was just one sweet part of.

He'd had evidence of this only a short time ago. Just after midnight a man called Tolland, apparently much

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feared among the fragile communities that gathered to sleep under the bridges and in the stations of Westminster, had gone on a rampage in Soho. He'd wounded two alcoholics in a back street, their sole offense to be in his path when his temper flowed. Clem had witnessed none of this, but had arrived after Tolland's arrest to see if he could coax from the gutter some of those whose beds and belongings had been demolished. None would go with him, however, and in the course of his vain persuasions one of the number, a woman he'd never seen without tears on her face until now, had smiled at him and said he should stay out in the open with them tonight rather than hiding in his bed, because the Lord was coming, and it would be the people on the streets who saw Him first. Had it not been for Taylor's fleeting reappearance in his life, Clem would have dismissed the woman's blissful talk, but there were too many imponderables in the air for him to ignore the vaguest signpost to the miraculous. He'd asked the woman what Lord this was that was coming, and she'd replied, quite sensibly, that it didn't matter. Why should she care what Lord it was, she said, as long as He came?

Now it was an hour before dawn, and he was trudging across Waterloo Bridge because he'd heard the psycho?pathic Tolland had usually kept to the South Bank and something odd must have happened to drive him across the river. A faint clue, to be sure, but enough to keep Clem walking, though hearth and pillow lay in the opposite direction.

The concrete bunkers of the South Bank complex had been a favorite *bete grise* of Taylor's, their ugliness railed against whenever the subject of contemporary architecture came up in conversation. The darkness presently concealed their drab, stained facades, but it also turned the maze of underpasses and walkways around them into terrain no bourgeois would tread for fear of his life or his wallet. Recent experience had taught Clem to ignore such anxieties. Warrens such as this usually contained individuals more ag?gressed against than aggressive, souls whose shouts were defenses against imagined enemies and whose tirades, how-

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ever terrifying they might seem emerging from shadow, usually dwindled into tears.

In fact, he'd not heard a whisper from the murk as he descended from the bridge. The cardboard city was visible where its suburbs spilled out into the meager lamplight, but the bulk of it lay under cover of the walkways, out of sight and utterly quiet. He began to suspect that the lunatic Tolland was not the only tenant who'd left his plot to travel north and, stooping to peer into the boxes on the outskirts, had that suspicion confirmed. He headed into shadow, fish?ing his pencil torch from his pocket to light the way. There was the usual detritus on the ground: spoiled scraps of food, broken bottles, vomit stains. But the boxes, and the beds of newspaper and filthy blankets they contained, were empty. More curious than ever, he wandered on through the rubbish, hoping to find a soul here too weak or too crazy to leave, who could explain this migration. But he passed through the city without finding a single occupant, emerging into what the planners of this concrete hell had designed as a children's playground. All that remained of their good intentions were the grimy bones of a slide and a jungle gym. The paving beyond them, however, was covered in fresh color, and advancing to the spot Clem found himself in the middle of a kitsch exhibition: crude chalk copies of movie-star portraits and glamour girls everywhere underfoot.

He ran the beam over the ground, following the trail of images. It led him to a wall, which was also decorated, but by a very different hand. Here was no mere copyist's work. This image was on such a grand scale Clem had to play his torch beam back and forth across it to grasp its splendor. A group of philanthropic muralists had apparently taken it upon themselves to enliven this underworld, and the result was a dream landscape, its sky green, with streaks of brilliant yellow, the plain beneath orange and red. Set on the sands, a walled city, with fantastical spires.

The torch beam caught a glint off the paint, and Clem approached the wall to discover that the muralists had only recently left off their labors. Patches of the paint were still tacky. Seen at close quarters, the rendering was extremely

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casual, almost slapdash. Barely more than half a dozen marks had been used to indicate the city and its towers, and only a single snaking stroke to show the highway running from the gates. Moving his beam off the picture to illuminate the way ahead, Clem realized why the muralists had been so haphazard. They had been at work on every available wall, creating a parade of brightly colored images, many of which were far stranger than the landscape with the green sky. To Clem's left was a man with two cupped hands

for a head, lightning jumping between the palms; to his right a family of freaks, with fur on their faces. Farther on was an alpine scene, fantastically by the addition of several naked women, hovering above the snows; beyond it a skull-strewn veldt, with a distant train belching smoke against a dazzling sky; and beyond that again, an island set in the middle of a sea disturbed by a single wave, in the foam of which a face could be discovered. All were painted with the same passionate haste as the first, which fact lent them the urgency of sketches and added to their power. Perhaps it was his exhaustion, or simply the bizarre setting for this exhibition, but Clem found himself oddly moved by the images. There was nothing ingratiating or sentimental about them. They were glimpses into the minds of strangers, and he was exhilarated to find such wonders there.

With his gaze following the journey of pictures, he'd lost all sense of his own direction, but when he turned out to look for the lamplight he saw a small fire burning up ahead, and in lieu of any other beacon he made his way towards it. The fire makers had occupied a small garden laid amid the concrete. It had perhaps once boasted a rose bed or flowering shrubs; benches, perhaps, dedicated to some dead city father. But now there was only a pitiful lawn, which barely greened the dirt it peered from. Gathered upon it were the tenants of the cardboard city, or some part of their number. Most were asleep, bundled up in their coats and blankets. But five or six were awake, standing around the fire and passing a cigarette between them as they talked.

A dreadlocked black squatted on the low wall beside the garden's gate and, spotting Clem, rose to guard the en-

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trance. Clem didn't retreat. There was no threat visible in the man's posture, nor anything but calm in the garden beyond. The sleepers did so quietly, their dreams seemingly kind. And the debaters around the fire spoke in whispers. When they laughed, which they did now and then, it wasn't the hard, desperate noise he'd heard among these clans, but light.

"Who are you, man?" the black asked him.

"My name's Clem. I got lost."

"You don't look like you been sleepin' rough, man."

"I haven't."

"So why you here?"

"Like I said: I got lost."

The man shrugged. "Waterloo Station's over in that direction," he said, pointing roughly back the way Clem had come. "But you got a long wait for the first train." He caught Clem's glance into the garden. "Sorry, man, you can't come in. If you got a bed, go to it."

Clem didn't move, however. Something about one of the men at the fire, standing with his back to the gate, rooted him to the spot.

"Who is that, who's talking now?" he asked the guard.

The man glanced around. "That's the Gentile," he said.

"The Gentle?" he said. "Surely you mean *Gentle*."

He hadn't raised his voice in order to name the man, but the syllables must have carried on the tranquil air, because as they went from Clem's lips the speaker stopped talking and slowly turned towards the gate. With the fire burning at his back his features were hard to make out, but Clem knew he'd made no error. The man turned back to his fellow debaters and said something to them Clem didn't catch. Then he left their fire and walked down to the gate.

"Gentle?" his visitor said. "It's Clem."

The black stood aside, opening the gate to let the man he'd called the Gentle step out of the garden. There he stood and studied the stranger.

"Do I know you?" he said. There was no enmity in his voice, but there was no warmth either. "I do, don't I?"

"Yes, you do, my friend," Clem replied. "Yes, you do."

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They walked together along the river, leaving the sleepers and the fire behind them. The many changes in Gentle soon became apparent. He was of course far from certain of who he was, but there were other changes which were, Clem sensed, profounder still. There was a plainness about his speech, and about the expression on his face, which was by turns disturbing and calming. Something of the Gentle he and Taylor had known had gone, perhaps forever. But something was on its way to being gained in its place, and Clem wanted to be there when it was: to be the angel guarding that tender self.

"Did you paint the pictures?" he asked.

"With my friend Monday," Gentle said. "We made them together."

"I never saw you paint anything like that before."

"They're places I've been," Gentle told him, "and people I've known. They start coming back to me when I've got the colors. But it's slow. There's so much filling my head"—he put his fingers to his brow, which bore a series of ill-healed lacerations—"confusing me. You call me Gentle, but I've got other names."

"John Zacharias?"

"That's one. Then there's a man in me called Joseph Bellamy, and another called Michael Morrison, and one called Almoth, and one called Fitzgerald, and one called Sartori. They all seem to be me, Clem. But that's not possible, is it? I asked Monday, and Carol, and Irish, and they said people have two names, sometimes three, but never ten."

"Maybe you've lived other lives, Gentle, and you're remembering them."

"If that's true, I don't want to remember. It hurts too much. I can't think straight. I want to be one man with one life. I want to know where I begin and where I end, instead of going on and on."

"Why's that so terrible?" Clem said, genuinely unable to see the horror in such expansion.

"Because I'm afraid there'll be no end to it," Gentle replied. He spoke steadily, like a metaphysician who'd

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reached a precipice and was calmly describing the abyss below for the benefit of those who couldn't—or wouldn't—be with him there. "I'm afraid I'm joined to everything else," he said. "And then I'm going to be lost. I want to be this man, or that man, but not every man. If I'm everyone I'm no one, and nothing."

He stopped his even stride and turned to Clem, putting his hands on Clem's shoulders.

"Who am I?" he said. "Just tell me. If you love me, tell me. Who am I?" "You're my friend."

It wasn't an eloquent reply, but it was the only one Clem had. Gentle studied his companion's face for a minute or more, as if calculating the potency of this axiom against his dread. And slowly, as he scanned Clem's features, a smile plucked at the corners of his mouth, and tears began to glisten in his eyes.

"You see me, don't you?" he said softly. "Of course I see you."

"I don't mean with your sight, I mean with your mind. I exist in your head."

"Gear as crystal," Clem said.

That was truer now than it had ever been. Gentle nodded, and his smile spread.

"Somebody else tried to teach me this," he said. "But I didn't understand." He paused, musing. Then he said, "It doesn't matter what I'm called. Names are nothing. I am what I am in *you*." His arms slipped around Clem, into an embrace. "I'm your friend."

He hugged Clem hard, then stood away, the tears clearing.

"Who was it who taught me that?" he wondered. "Judith, maybe?"

He shook his head. "I see her face over and over," he said. "But it wasn't her. It was somebody who went away." "Was it Taylor?" Clem said. "Do you remember Tay-lor?"

"He knew me too?" "He loved you."

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"Where is he now?"

"That's a whole other story."

"Is it?" Gentle replied. "Or is it all one?"

They walked on along the river, exchanging questions and answers as they went. At Gentle's request Clem recounted Taylor's story, from life to deathbed, from deathbed to light, and Gentle in his turn offered what clues he had to the nature of the journey he'd returned from. Though he could remember very few of the details, he knew that unlike Taylor's it had not taken him into brightness. He'd lost many friends along the way—their names mingled with those of the lives he'd lived—and seen the deaths of many others. But he'd also witnessed the wonders he'd painted on the walls. Sunless skies that shimmered green and gold; a palace of mirrors, like Versailles; vast, mysterious deserts and ice cathedrals full of bells. Listening to these traveler's tales, the vistas of hitherto unknown worlds spreading in all directions, Clem felt his earlier ease with the notion of an unbounded self, going into some limitless adventure, falter. The very divisions he'd happily tried to persuade Gentle from at the outset of this report looked tempting now. But they were a trap, and he knew it. Their comfort would smother and hobble him eventually. He had to unburden himself of his old, stale ways of thinking if he was to travel alongside this man into places where dead souls were light and being was a function of thought.

"Why did you come back?" he asked Gentle after a time.

"I wish I knew," Gentle replied.

"We should find Judith. I think maybe she knows more about this than either of us."

"I don't want to leave these people, Clem. They took mein."

"I understand that," Clem said. "But Gentle, they can't help you now. They don't understand what's going on."

"Nor do we," Gentle reminded him. "But they listened when I told my story. They watched me paint, and they asked me questions, and when I told them the visions I'd had they didn't mock me." He stopped and pointed over

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the river towards the Houses of Parliament. "The lawgivers'll be coming there soon," he said. "Would you trust what I just told you to them? If we said to them that the dead come back in sunlight and there are worlds where the sky's green and gold, what would they say?" "They'd say we were crazy."

"Yes, And throw us into the gutter with Monday and Carol and Irish and all the rest."

"They're not in the gutter because they had visions, Gentle," Clem said. "They're there because they've been abused, or they've abused themselves."

"Which means they can't cover their despair the way there's can. They've got no distractions from their pain. So they get drunk and crazy, and the next day they're even more lost than they were the day before. But I'd still rather trust them than all the bishops and the ministers. Maybe they're naked, but isn't that a holy state?"

"It's also a vulnerable one," Clem pointed out. "You can't drag them into this war."

"Who said there's going to be a war?" "Judith," Clem replied. "But even if she hadn't, it's in the air."

"Does she know who the enemy's going to be?" "No. But it'll be a hard battle, and if you care for these

people you won't put them in the front line. They'll be there when the war's over."

Gentle pondered this for a time. Finally, he said, "So they'll be the peacemakers."

"Why not? They can spread the good news."

Gentle nodded. "I like that," he said. "And so will they."

"So shall we go and find Judith?"

"I think that'd be wise. But first, I have to say goodbye."

The day came with them as they retraced their steps along the bank, and by the time they reached the underpass the shadows were no longer black but gray-blue. Some of the beams had found their way through the concrete bridges and barricades and were edging towards the threshold of the garden.

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"Where did you go?" Irish said, meeting his Gentile at the gate. "We thought you'd slipped away."

"I want you to meet a friend of mine," Gentle said. "This is Clem. Clem, this is Irish; this is Carol and Benedict. Where's Monday?"

"Asleep," said Benedict, the sometime guard.

"What's Clem short for?" Carol asked.

"Clement."

"I've seen you before," she said. "Didn't you used to bring round soup? You did, didn't you? I never forget faces."

Gentle led the way through the gate and into the garden. The fire was almost out, but there were enough embers to thaw chilled fingers. He squatted down beside the fire and poked at it with a stick to stir some flame, beckoning Clem to warm himself. But as Clem bent to do so he stopped.

"What is it?" Gentle said.

Clem's eyes went from the fire to the bundled forms still slumbering all around: twenty or more, still lost in dreams, though the light was creeping over them.

"Listen," he said.

One of the sleepers was laughing, so softly it was barely audible.

"Who is that?" Gentle said. The sound was contagious and brought a smile to his face.

"It's Taylor," Clem said.

"There's no one here called Taylor," Benedict said.

"Well, he's here," Clem replied.

Gentle stood up and scanned the sleepers. In the far corner of the garden Monday was lying flat on his back, with a blanket barely covering his paint-spattered clothes. A beam of morning light had found its straight, bright way between the concrete pillars and was settled on his chest, catching his chin and his pale lips. As if its gilding tickled, he laughed in his sleep.

"That's the boy who made the paintings with me," Gentle said.

"Monday," Clem remembered.

"That's right."

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Clem picked his way through the dormitory to the youth's side. Gentle followed, but before he reached the sleeper the laughter faded. Monday's smile lingered, however, the sun catching the blond hairs on his upper lip. His eyes didn't open, but when he spoke it was as if he saw.

"Look at you, Gentle," he said. "The traveler returned. No, I'm impressed, really I am."

It wasn't quite Taylor's voice—the larynx shaping it twenty years too young—but the cadences were his; so was the sly warmth.

"Clem told you I was hanging around, I presume."

"Of course," Clem said.

"Strange times, eh? I used to say I'd been born into the wrong age. But it looks as though I died into the right one. So much to gain. So much to lose."

"Where do I begin?" Gentle said.

"You're the Maestro, Gentle, not me."

"Maestro, am I?"

"He's still remembering, Tay," Clem explained.

"Well, he should be quick about it," Taylor said. "You've had your holiday, Gentle. Now you've got some healing to do. There's a hell of a void waiting to take us all if you fuck up. And if it comes"—the smile went from Monday's face—"if it comes there won't be any more spirits in the light, because there won't be any light. Where's your familiar, by the way?"

"Who?"

"The mystic."

Gentle's breath quickened.

"You lost it once, and I went looking for it. I found it too, mourning its children. Don't you remember?"

"Who was this?" Clem asked.

"You never met it," Taylor said. "If you had, you'd remember."

"I don't think Gentle does," Clem said, looking at the Maestro's troubled face.

"Oh, the mystifs in there somewhere," Taylor said. "Once seen, never forgotten. Go on, Gentle. Name it for me. It's on the tip of your tongue."

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Gentle's expression became pained.

"It's the love of your life, Gentle," Taylor said, coaxing Gentle on. "Name it. I dare you. Name it."

Gentle frowned and mouthed silence. But finally his throat gave up its hostage. "Pie ..." he murmured.

Taylor smiled through Monday's face. "Yes...?"

"Pie 'oh' pah."

"What did I tell you? Once seen, never forgotten."

Gentle said the name again and again, breathing it as though the syllables were an incantation. Then he turned to Clem.

"That lesson I never learned," he said. "It came from Pie."

"Where's the mystif now?" Taylor asked. "Do you have any idea?"

Gentle went down on his haunches beside Tay's sleeping ghost. "Gone," he said, closing his hands around the sun?light.

"Don't do that," Taylor said softly. "You only catch the dark that way." Gentle opened his hand again and let the light lie on his palm. "You say the mystifs gone?" Tay went on. "Where, for God's sake? How can you lose it twice?"

"It went into the First Dominion," Gentle replied. "It died and went where I couldn't follow."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"But I'll see it again, when I've done my work," Gentle said.

"Finally, we get to it," Tay said.

"I'm the Reconciler," Gentle said. "I've come to open the Dominions ..."

"So you have, Maestro," Tay said.

"... on Midsummer Night."

"You're cutting it fine," Clem said. "That's tomorrow."

"It can be done," Gentle said, standing up again. "I know who I am now. He can't hurt me any more."

"Who can't?" Clem asked.

"My enemy," Gentle replied, turning his face into the sunlight. "Myself."

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2

After only a few days in this city that enemy, the sometime Autarch Sartori, had begun yearning for the languid dawns and elegaic dusks of the Dominion he'd left. The day came together too quickly here and was snuffed out with, the same alacrity. That would have to change. Among his plans for the New Yzordderrex would be a palace made of mirrors, and of glass made possessive by feits, that would hold the glory of these inkling dawns and protract them, so that they met the glow of dusk coming in other directions. Then he might be happy here.

There would be, he knew, little in the way of resistance to his taking of the Fifth, to judge by the ease with which the members of the Tabula Rasa had succumbed to him. All but one of them was now dead, cornered in their burrows like rabid vermin. Not one had detained him more than minutes; they had given up their lives quickly, with few sobs and still fewer prayers. He wasn't surprised. Their ancestors had been strong-willed men, but even the most pungent blood thinned over generations, and the children of their children of their children (and so on) were faithless cowards.

The only surprise he'd had in this Dominion, and it was a sweet one, was the woman whose bed he was returning to: the peerless and eternal Judith. His first taste of her had been in Quaisoir's chambers when, mistaking her for the woman he'd married, he'd made love to her on the bed of veils. Only later, as he'd prepared to quit Yzordderrex, had Rosengarten informed him of Quaisoir's maiming and gone on to report the presence of a doppelgänger in the corridors of the palace. That report had been Rosengarten's last as a loyal commander. When, a few minutes later, he'd been ordered to join his Autarch on the journey to the Fifth, he'd unconditionally refused. The Second was his home, he said, and Yzordderrex his pride, and if he was to die then he wanted it to be in sight of the comet. Tempted as he was to punish the man for this dereliction of duty, Sartori had no

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desire to enter his new world with blood on his hands. He'd let the man go and departed for the Fifth, believing the woman he'd made love to on Quaisoir's bed was somewhere in the city behind him. But no sooner had he taken up the mask of his brother's life than he'd met her again, in Klein's garden of scentless flowers.

He never ignored omens, good or bad. Judith's reappearance in his life was a sign that they belonged together, and it seemed that she, all unknowing, felt the same. Here was the woman for the love of whom this whole sorry catalogue of death and desolation had been started, and in her company he felt himself renewed, as though the sight of her reminded his cells of the self he'd been before his fall. He was being offered a second chance: an opportunity to start again with the creature he'd loved and make an empire

that would erase all memory of his previous failure. He'd had proof of their compatibility when they'd made love. A more perfect welding of erotic impulses he could scarcely have imagined. After it, he'd gone out into the city about the business of murder with more vigor than ever.

It would take time, of course, to persuade her that this was a marriage decreed by fate. She believed him to be his other and would be vengeful when he disabused her of this fiction. But he would bring her around in time. He had to. He had intimations, even in this blithe city, of intolerable things: whispers of oblivion that made the foulest Oviathe he'd ever dredged up look alluring. She could save him from that, lick off his sweats and rock him to sleep. He had no fear that she'd reject him. He had a claim on her that would make her put aside all moral niceties: his child, planted in her two nights before.

It was his first. Though he and Quaisoir had attempted to found a dynasty many times, she'd repeatedly miscarried, then later corrupted her body with so much kreauchee it refused to produce another egg. But this Judith was a wonder. Not only had she made surpassing love with him, there was fruit from that coupling. And when the time came to tell her

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(once the irksome Oscar Godolphin was dead, and the line for whom she'd been made stopped), then she would see the perfection of their union and feel it, kicking in her womb.

3

Jude hadn't slept, waiting for Gentle to return from another night of wanderings. The summons she carried from Celestine was too heavy to sleep with; she wanted it said and done, so she could put her thoughts of the woman away. Nor did she want to be unconscious when he returned. The idea of his coming in and watching her sleep, which would have been comforting two nights before, unsettled her now. He was the egg licker, and its thief. When she had her possession back and he was gone off to Highgate, she'd rest, but not before.

The day was creeping up when he finally returned, but there was insufficient light for her to read much on his face until he was within a few yards of her, by which time he was wreathed in smiles. He chastised her fondly for waiting up. There was no need, he said; he was quite safe. The pleasant cries stopped here, however. He saw her unease and wanted to know what was wrong.

"I went to Roxborough's tower," she told him.

"Not on your own, I hope. Those people can't be trusted."

"I took Oscar."

"And how's Oscar?"

She was in no mood to prettify. "He's dead," she said.

He looked genuinely saddened at this. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he insisted. "Please. I want to know."

"Dowd was there. He killed Godolphin."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. He tried. But no."

"You shouldn't have gone up there without me. What on earth possessed you?"

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She told him, as plainly as she knew: "Roxborough had a prisoner," she said. "A woman he buried under the tower."

"He kept that little kink to himself," came the reply. She thought there was something almost admiring in his tone, but she fought the temptation to accuse him. "So you went to dig up her bones, did you?"

"I went to release her."

Now she had every scrap of his attention. "I don't follow," he said.

"She's not dead."

"So she's not human." He made a curt little smile. "What was Roxborough doing up there? Raising wankers?"

"I don't know what wankers are."

"They're ethereal whores."

"That doesn't describe Celestine." She trailed the bait of the name, but he failed to bite. "She's human. Or at least she was."

"And what is she now?"

Jude shrugged. "Something ... else. I don't quite know what. She's powerful, though. She almost killed Dowd."

"Why?"

"I think you're better off hearing that from her."

"Why should I want to?" he said lightly.

"She asked to see you. She says she knows you."

"Really? Did she say from where?"

"No. But she told me to mention Nisi Nirvana."

He chuckled at this.

"Does it mean something to you?" Jude said.

"Yes, of course. It's a story for children. Don't you know it?"

"No."

Even as she spoke, she realized why, but it was he who voiced the reason. ,

"Of course you don't," he said. "You were never a child, were you?"

She studied his face, wishing she could be certain he meant to be cruel, but still not sure that the indelicacy she'd

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sensed in him, and now sensed again, wasn't a newfound na-'fvete*.

"So will you go to her?"

"Why should I? I don't know her."

"But *she* knows you."

"What is this?" he said. "Are you trying to palm me off on another woman?"

He took a step towards her, and though she tried to conceal her reluctance to be touched, she failed.

"Judith," he said. "I swear I don't know this Celestine. It's you I think about when I'm not here—"

"I don't want to discuss that now."

"What do you suspect me of?" he said. "I've done nothing. I swear." He laid both his hands on his chest. "You're hurting me, Judith. I don't know if that's what you want to do, but you are. You're hurting me."

"That's a new experience for you, is it?"

"Is that what this is about? A sentimental education? If it is, I beg you, don't torment me now. We've got too many enemies to be fighting with each other."

"I'm not fighting. I don't want to fight."

"Good," he said, opening his arms. "So come here."

She didn't move.

"Judith."

"I want you to go and see Celestine. I promised her I'd find you, and you'll make a liar of me if you don't go."

"All right, I'll go," he said. "But I'm going to come back, love, you can depend on that. Whoever she is, whatever she looks like, it's you I want." He paused. "Now more than ever," he said.

She knew he wanted her to ask him why, and for fully ten seconds she kept her silence rather than satisfy him. But the look on his face was so brimming she couldn't keep her curiosity from putting the question on her tongue.

"Why now?" she said.

"I wasn't going to tell you yet..."

"Tell me what?"

"We're going to have a child, Judith."

She stared at him, waiting for some further explanation:

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that he'd found an orphan on the street or was bringing a babe from the Dominions. But that wasn't what he meant at all, and her pounding heart knew it. He meant a child born from the act they'd performed: a consequence.

"It'll be my first," he said. "Yours too, yes?"

She wanted to call him liar. How could *he* know when *she* didn't? But he was quite certain of his facts.

"He'll be a prophet," he said. "You'll see."

She already had, she realized. She'd entered its tiny life when the egg had plunged her consciousness down into her own body. She'd seen with its stirring spirit: a jungle city, and living waters; Gentle, wounded, and coming to take the egg from tiny fingers. Had that perhaps been the first of its prophecies?

"We made a kind of love no other beings in this Dominion could make," Gentle was saying. "The child came from that."

"You knew what you were doing?"

"I had my hopes."

"And didn't I get a choice in the matter? I'm just a womb, am I?"

"That's not how it was."

"A walking womb!"

"You're making it grotesque."

"It is grotesque."

"What are you saying? How can anything that comes from us be less than perfection?" He spoke with almost religious zeal. "I'm changing, sweet. I'm discovering what it is to love, and cherish, and plan for the future. See how you're changing me?"

"From what? From the great lover to the great father? Another day, another Gentle?"

He looked as though he had an answer on his tongue but bit it back. "We know what we mean to each other," he said. "There should be proof of that. Judith, please—" His arms were still open, but she refused to go into them. "When I came here I said I'd make mistakes, and I asked you to forgive me if I did. I'm asking you again now."

She bowed her head and shook it. "Go away," she said.

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"I'll see this woman if you want me to. But before I go, I want you to swear something to me. I want you to swear you won't try and harm what's in you."

"Go to hell."

"It's not for me. It's not even for the child. It's for you. If you were to do any harm to yourself because of something I did, my life wouldn't be worth living."

"I'm not going to slit my wrists, if that's what you think."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

"If you try to abort the child, it won't go passively. It's got *our* purpose in it; it's got *our* strength. It'll fight for its life, and it may take yours in the process. Do you understand what I'm saying?" She shuddered. "Speak to me."

"I've got nothing to say to you that you want to hear. Go talk to Celestine."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"Just...go...away."

She looked up. The sun had found the wall behind him and was celebrating there. But he remained in shadow. For all his grand purpose, he was still made to be fugitive: a liar and a fraud.

"I want to come back," he said.

She didn't answer.

"If you're not here, I'll know what you want from me."

Without a further word he went to the door and let himself out. Only as she heard the front door slam did she shake herself from her stupor and realize he'd taken the egg with him as he went. But then like all mirror lovers he was fond of symmetry, and it probably pleased him to have that piece of her in his pocket, knowing she had a piece of him in a deeper place still.

14

I

Even though Gentle had known the tribe of the South Bank only a few hours, parting from them wasn't easy. He'd felt more secure in their company for that short time than he'd felt with many men and women he'd known for years. They, for their part, were used to loss—it was the theme of almost every life story he'd heard—so there were no histrionics or accusations, just a heavy silence. Only Monday, whose victimization had first stirred the stranger from his passivity, made any attempt to have Gentle linger.

"We've only got a few more walls to paint," he said, "and we'll have covered them all. A few days. A week at the most."

"I wish I had that long," Gentle told him. "But I can't postpone the work I came back to do."

Monday had of course been asleep while Gentle talked with Tay (and had woken much confounded by the respect he got), but the others, especially Benedict, had new words to add to the vocabulary of miracles.

"So what does a Reconciler do?" he asked Gentle. "If you're goin' off to the Dominions, man, we want to becomin' with you."

"I'm not leaving Earth. But if and when I do, you'll be the first to know about it."

"What if we never see you again?" Irish said.

"Then I'll have failed."

"And you're dead and gone?"

"That's right."

"He won't fuck up," Carol said. "Will you, love?"

"But what do we do with what we know?" Irish said, clearly troubled by this burden of mysteries. "With you gone, it won't make sense to us."

"Yes, it will," Gentle said. "Because you'll be telling

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other people, and that way the stories will stay alive until the door to the Dominions is open."

"So we should tell people?"

"Anyone who'll listen."

There were murmurs of assent from the assembly. Hereat least was a purpose, a connection with the tale they'd heard and its teller.

"If you need us for anything," Benedict purred, "you know where to find us."

"Indeed I do," Gentle said, and went with Clem to the gate.

"And what if anybody comes looking for you?" Carol called after them.

"Tell 'em I was a mad bastard and you kicked me over the bridge."

This earned a few grins.

"That's what we'll say, Maestro," Irish said. "But I'm tel-lin' you, if you don't come back for us one of these days, we're goin' to come lookin' for you."

The farewells over, Clem and Gentle headed up onto Waterloo Bridge in search of a cab to take them across the city to Jude's place. It wasn't yet six, and though the flow of northbound traffic was beginning to thicken as the first commuters appeared, there were no taxis to be had, so they started across the bridge on foot in the hope of finding a cab on the Strand.

"Of all the company to have found you in," Clem remarked as they went, "that has to be the strangest."

"You came looking for me there," Gentle pointed out, "so you must have had some inkling."

"I suppose I must."

"And believe me, I've kept stranger company. A lot stranger."

"I believe it. I'd like you to tell me about the whole journey one day soon. Will you do that?"

"I'll do my best. But it'll be difficult without a map. I kept telling Pie I'd draw one, so that if I ever passed through the Dominions again and got lost..."

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"You'd be found."

"Exactly."

"And did you make a map?"

"No. There was never time, somehow. There always seemed to be something new to distract me."

"Tell me as much as— Whoa! I see a cab!"

Clem stepped out into the street and waved the vehicle down. They both got in and Clem supplied the driver with directions. As he was doing so, the man peered into his mirror.

"Is that someone you know?"

They looked back along the bridge to see Monday pelting towards them. Seconds later the paint-smearing face was at the taxi window, and Monday was begging to join them.

"You've got to let me come with you, boss. It's not fair if you don't. I gave you my colors, didn't I? Where would you be without my colors?"

"I can't risk your getting hurt," Gentle said.

"If I get hurt it's my hurt and it's my fault."

"Are we going, or what?" the driver wanted to know.

"Let me come, boss. Please."

Gentle shrugged, then nodded. The grin, which had gone from Monday's face during his appeal, returned in glory, and he clambered into the cab, rattling his tobacco tin of chalks like a ju-ju as he did so.

"I brought the colors," he said, "just in case we need 'em. You never know when we might have to draw a quick Dominion or something, right?"

Though the journey to Judith's flat was relatively short, there were signs everywhere—mostly small, but so numerous their sum became significant—that the days of venomous heat and unclesing storm were taking their toll on the city and its occupants. There were vociferous altercations at every other corner, and some in the middle of the street; there were scowls and furrows on every passing face.

"Tay said there was a void coming," Clem remarked as they waited at an intersection for two furious motorists to

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be stopped from making nooses of each other's neckties. "Is this all part of it?"

"It's bloody madness is what it is," the cabbie chimed in. "There's been more murders in the last five days than in all of last year. I read that somewhere. And it's not just murders, neither, it's people toppling themselves. A mate of mine, a cabbie like, was up the Arsenal on Tuesday and this woman just throws herself in front of his cab. Straight under the front wheels. Bloody tragic."

The fighters had finally been refereed and were being escorted to opposite pavements.

"I don't know what the world's coming to," the cabbie said. "It's bloody madness."

His piece said, he turned on the radio as the traffic began moving again, and began whistling in an out-of-tune accompaniment to the ballad that emerged.

"Is this something we can help stop?" Clem asked Gentle. "Or is it just going to get worse?"

"I hope the Reconciliation will put an end to it. But I can't be certain. This Dominion's been sealed up for so long, it's poisoned itself with its own shit."

"So we just have to pull down the sod din' walls," Monday said, with the glee of a born demolisher. He rattled histin of colors again. "You mark 'em," he said, "and I'llknock 'em down. Easy."

2

The child, Jude had been told, had more purpose in it thanmost, and she believed it. But what did that mean, besides the risk of its fury if she tried to unhouse it? Would it grow faster than others? Would she be big with it by dusk, and her water ready to break before morning? She lay in the bedroom now, the day's heat already weighing on her limbs, and hoped the stories she'd heard from radiant mothers were true, that her body would pour palliatives into her bloodstream to ease the traumas of nurturing and expelling another life.

When the doorbell rang her first instinct was to ignore it,

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but her visitors, whoever they were, kept on ringing and eventually began to shout up at the window. One called for Judy; the other, more oddly, for Jude. She sat up, and for a moment it was as though her anatomy had shifted. Her heart thumped in her head, and her thoughts had to be dragged up out of her belly to form the intention to leave the room and go down to the door. The voices were still summoning her from below, but they petered out as she headed down the stairs, and she was ready to find the door's step empty when she got there. Not so. There was an adolescent there, besmirched with color, who upon sight of her turned and hollered to her other visitors, who were across the street, peering up at her flat.

"She's here!" he yelled. "Boss? She's here!"

They started back across the road towards the step, and as they came her heart, still beating in her head, took up a suicidal tempo. She reached out for some support as the man at Clem's side met her eyes and smiled. This wasn't Gentle. At least it wasn't the egg-thief Gentle who'd left a couple of hours before, his face flawless. This one hadn't shaved for several days and had a brow of scabs.

She backed away from the step, her hand failing to find the door though she wanted to slam it. "Keep away from me," she said.

He stopped a yard or two from the threshold, seeing the panic on her face. The youth had turned to him, and the im-poster signaled that he should retreat, which he did, leaving the line of vision between them clear.

"I know. I look like shit," the scabby face said. "But it's me, Jude."

She took two steps back from the blaze in which he stood (How the light liked him! Not like the other, who'd been in shadow every time she'd set eyes on him), her sinews fluttering from toes to fingertips, their motion escalating as though a fit was about to seize her. She reached for the banister and took hold of it to keep herself from falling over.

"It can't be," she said.

This time the man made no reply. It was his accomplice

in this deceit—Clem, of all people—who said, "Judy. We have to talk to you. Can I come in?"

"Just you," she said. "Not them. Just you."

"Just me."

He came to the door, approaching her slowly, palms out, "What's happened here?" he said.

"That's not Gentle," she told him. "Gentle's been with me for the last two days. And nights. That's... I don't know who."

The imposter heard what she was telling Clem. She could see his face over the other man's shoulder, so shocked the words might have been blows. The more she tried to explain to Clem what had happened, the more she lost faith with what she was saying. This Gentle, waiting outside, was the man she'd left on the studio step, standing bewildered in the sun as he was now. And if this was he, then the lover who'd come to her, the egg licker and fertilizer, was some other, some terrible other.

She saw Gentle make the man's name with his lips: "Sar-tori,"

Hearing the name and knowing it was true—knowing that the butcher of Yzordderex had found a place in her bed, heart, and womb—the convulsions threatened to overtake her completely. But she clung to the solid, sweaty world as best she could, determined that these men, his enemies, should know what he'd done.

"Come in," she said to Gentle. "Come in and close the door."

He brought the boy with him, but she didn't have the will to waste on objecting. He also brought a question: "Did he harm you?"

"No," she said. She almost wished he had, wished he'd given her a glimpse of his atrocious self. "You told me he was changed, Gentle," she said. "You said he was a monster; he was corrupted, you said. But he was exactly like you."

She let her rage simmer in her as she spoke, working its alchemy on the abhorrence she felt and turning it into purer, wiser stuff. Gentle had misled her with his descrip-

tions of his other, creating in her mind's eye a man so tainted by his deeds he was barely human. There'd been no malice in his deception; only the desire to be utterly divided from the man who shared his face. But now he knew his error and was plainly ashamed. He hung back, watching her while the tremors in her body slowed. There was steel in her sinew and it held her up, lent her the strength to finish the account. There was no sense in keeping the last part of Sar-tori's deceit from either Gentle or Clem. It would be apparent soon enough. She laid her hand on her belly.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "His child. Sartori's child."

In a more rational world she might have been able to interpret the expression on Gentle's face as he received the news, but its complexity defied her. There was anger in the maze, certainly, and bafflement too. But was there also a little jealousy? He hadn't wanted her company when they'd returned from the Dominions; his mission as Reconciler had scourged his libido. But now that she'd been touched by his other, *pleasured* by him (did he see that guilt somewhere on her face, as ineptly buried as his jealousy?) he was feeling pangs of possessiveness. As ever with their story, there was no sentiment untainted by paradox.

It was Clem, dear comforting Clem, who opened his arms now and said, "Any chance of a hug?"

"Oh, God, yes," she said. "Every chance."

He crossed to her and wrapped his embrace around her. They rocked together.

"I should have known, Clem," she said, too quietly for Gentle or the boy to hear.

"Hindsight's easy," he said, kissing her hair. "I'm just glad you're alive."

"He never threatened me. He never laid a finger on me that I didn't..."

"Ask for?"

"I didn't need to ask," she said. "He knew."

The sound of the front door reopening made her raise her head from Clem's shoulder. Gentle was stepping out into the sun again, with the youth following. Once outside, he looked up, cupping his hand over his brow to study the

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sky at his zenith. Seeing him do so, Jude realized who the sky watcher she'd glimpsed in the Boston Bowl had been. It was a small solving, but she wasn't about to spurn the satisfaction it provided.

"Sartori is Gentle's brother, is that right?" Clem said. "I'm afraid I'm still hazy on the family relations."

"They're not brothers, they're twins," she replied. "Sartori is his perfect double."

"How perfect?" Clem asked, looking at her with a small, almost mischievous smile on his face. "Oh ... very perfect." "So it wasn't so bad, his being here?" She shook her head. "It wasn't bad at all," she replied. Then, after a moment: "He told me he loved me, Clem." "Oh, Lord." "And I believed him."

"How many dozens of men have told you that?" "Yes, but he was different..." "Famous last words."

She looked at the sun watcher for a few seconds, puzzled by the calm that had come over her. Was the mere memory of his commitment to her enough to assuage every dread? "What are you thinking?" Clem asked her. "That he feels something Gentle never did," she replied. "Maybe never could. Before you say it, I know the whole thing's repulsive. He's a destroyer. He's wiped out whole countries. How can I be feeling anything for him?" "You want the clichés?" "Tell me."

"You feel what you feel Some people go for sailors, some people go for men in rubber suits and feather boas. We do what we do. Never explain, never apologize. There. That's all you're getting."

Her hands went to his face. She cupped it, then kissed it. "You are sublime," she said. "We're going to survive, aren't we?"

"Survive and prosper," he said. "But I think we'd better find your beau, for everybody's—"

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He stopped as her grip on him tightened. All trace of joy had gone from her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Celestine. I sent him up to Highgate. To Roxborough's tower."

"I'm sorry, I'm not following this."

"It's bad news," she said, leaving his embrace and hurrying to the front door.

Gentle relinquished his zenith watching at her summons and returned to the step as she repeated what she'd just told Clem.

"What's up in Highgate?" he said.

"A woman who wanted to see you. Does the name Nisi Nirvana mean anything to you?"

Gentle puzzled over this for a moment. "It's something from a story," he said.

"No, Gentle. She's real. She's alive. At least she was."

3

It hadn't been sentiment alone that had moved the Autarch Sartori to have the streets of London depicted in such loving detail on the walls of his palace. Though he'd spent only a little time in this city—no more than weeks, between his birth and his departure for the Reconciled Dominions—Mother London and Father Thames had educated him right royally. Of course the metropolis visible from the summit of Highgate Hill, where he stood now, was vaster and grimmer than the city he'd wandered then, but there were enough signs remaining to stir some poignant and pungent memories. He'd learned sex in these streets, from the professionals around Drury Lane. He'd learned murder at the riverside, watching the bodies washed up in the mud on a Sunday morning after the slaughters of Saturday night. He'd learned law at Lincoln's Inn Field and seen justice done at Tyburn. All fine lessons, that had helped to make him the man he was. The only lesson he couldn't remember learning, whether in these streets or any other, was how to be an architect. He must have had a tutor in that, he pre-

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sumed, at some time. After all, wasn't he the man whose vision had built a palace that would stand in legend, even though its towers were now rubble? Where, in the furnace of his genes or in his history, was the kindling spark of that genius? Perhaps he'd only discover the answer in the raising of his New

Yzordderrex. If he was patient and watchful, the face of his mentor would sooner or later appear in its walls. There would have to be a great demolishing, however, before the foundations were laid, and banalities like the Tabula Rasa's tower, which he now came in sight of, would be the first to be condemned. He crossed the forecourt to the front door, whistling as he went and wondering if the woman Judith had been so insistent he meet—this Celestine—could hear his trill. The door stood open, but he doubted any thief, however opportunist, had dared enter. The air around the threshold fairly pricked with power, putting him in mind of his beloved Pivot Tower.

Still whistling, he crossed the foyer to a second door and stepped through it into a room he knew. He'd walked these ancient boards twice in his life: the first time the day before the Reconciliation, when he'd presented himself to Roxborough here, passing himself off as the Maestro Sartori for the perverse pleasure of shaking the hands of the Reconciler's patrons before the sabotage he'd planned took them to Hell; the second time, the night after the Reconciliation, with storms tearing up the skies from Hadrian's Wall to Land's End. On this occasion he'd come with Chant, his new familiar, intending to kill Lucius Cobbitt, the boy he'd made his unwitting agent in the sabotage. Having searched for him in Gamut Street and found him gone, he'd braved the storm—there were forests uprooted and lifted in the air, and a man struck by lightning burning on Highgate Hill—only to discover that Roxborough's house was empty. He'd never found Cobbitt. Driven from the safety of Gamut Street by his sometime Maestro, the youth had probably fallen prey to the storm, as so many others had that night.

Now the room stood silent, and so did he. The lords who'd built this house, and their children, who'd raised the tower above, were dead. It was a welcome hush; in it,

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there'd be time for dalliance. He wandered over to the mantelpiece and headed down the stairs, descending into a library he'd never known existed until this moment. He might have been tempted to linger, perusing the laden shelves, but the pricking power he'd felt at the front door was stronger than ever and drew him on, more intrigued with every yard.

He heard the woman's voice before he set eyes on her, emanating from a place where the restless dust was so thick it was like walking in a delta fog. Barely visible through it; ascene of sheer vandalism: books, scrolls, and manuscripts reduced to shreds or buried in the wreckage of the shelves they'd been laid upon. And beyond the rubble, a hole in the brick; and from the hole, a call.

"Is that Sartori?"

"Yes," he said.

"Come closer. Let me see you."

He presented himself at the bottom of the heap of rubble.

"I thought she'd failed to find you," Celestine said. "Or else you'd refused to come."

"How could I refuse a summons like this?" he said softly.

"Do you think this is some kind of liaison?" she replied. "Some secret tryst?"

Her voice was raw with the dust, and bitter. He liked the sound of it. Women who had anger in them

were always so much more interesting than their contented sisters.

"Come in, Maestro," she said to him. "Let me put you to rights."

He clambered up over the stones and peered into the darkness. The cell was a wretched hole, as sordid as anything beneath his palace, but the woman who'd occupied it was no anchorite. Her flesh hadn't been chastened by incarceration, but looked lush, for all the marks upon it. The tendrils that clung to her body extolled her fluency, moving over her thighs and breasts and belly like unctuous snakes. Some clung to her head and paid court at her honey lips; others lay between her legs in bliss. He felt her tender gaze on him and luxuriated in it.

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"Handsome," she said.

He took her compliment as an invitation to approach, but as he did so she made a murmur of distress, and he stopped in his tracks.

"What's this shadow in you?" she said.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he told her.

Some of the filaments parted, and longer tendrils, these not courtiers but part of her substance, uncurled from behind her, clinging to the rough wall and hauling her up.

"I've heard that before," she said. "When a man tells you there's nothing to be afraid of, he's lying. Even you, Sartori."

"I won't come any closer if it bothers you," he said.

It wasn't respect for the woman's unease that moved him to compliance, but the sight of the ribbons that had lifted her. Quaisoir had sprouted such appendages, he recalled, after her intimacies with the women of the Bastion of the Banu. They were evidence of some facility in the other sex he had no real comprehension of: a remnant of crafts all but banished from the Reconciled Dominions by Hapexamen-dios. Perhaps they'd seen a new, poisonous flowering in the Fifth in the time since he'd left. Until he knew the scope of their authority, he'd be circumspect,

"I'd like to ask a question, if I may?" he said.

"Yes?"

"How do you know who I am?"

"First, tell me where you've been all these years."

Oh, the temptation he felt to tell her the truth, then, and parade his achievements in the hope of impressing her. But he'd come here in the guise of his other, and, as with Judith, he'd have to choose the moment of his unmasking carefully.

"I've been wandering," he said. It wasn't so untrue.

"Where?"

"In the Second Dominion, and occasionally the Third."

"Were you ever in Yzordderrex?"

"Sometimes."

"And in the desert outside the city?"

"There too. Why do you ask?"

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"I was there once. Before you were born."

"I'm older than I look," he told her. "I know it doesn't show—"

"I know how long you've lived, Sartori," she replied. "To the very day."

Her certainty nourished the discomfort bred by the sight of the tendrils. Could she read his thoughts, this woman? If so—if she knew what he was and all he'd done—why wasn't she in awe of him?

There was no profit in pretending that he didn't care that she seemed to know so much. Plainly but politely, he asked her how, preparing as he spoke a profusion of excuses if she was simply one of the Maestri's casual conquests and accused him of forgetting her. But the accusation, when it came, was of another kind entirely.

"You've done great harm in your life, haven't you?" she said to him.

"No more than most," he protested mildly. "I've been tempted to a few excesses, certainly. But then hasn't everybody?"

"A few excesses?" she said. "I think you've done more than that. There's evil in you, Sartori. I smell it in your sweat, the way I smelled coitus in the woman."

Her mention of Judith—who else could this venerable woman be?—reminded him of the prophecy he'd made to her two nights before. They would find darkness in each other, he'd said; and that was a perfectly human condition. The argument had proved potent then. Why not now?

"It's just the humanity in me you can sense," he said to Celestine.

She was clearly unpersuaded. "Oh, no," she replied. "It's the humanity in you."

He was about to laugh this absurdity off, but her stare hushed him.

"What part of me are you?" he murmured.

"Don't you know yet?" she said. "Child, I'm your mother."

Gentle led the way as they stepped into the cool of the tower's foyer. There was no sound from anywhere in the building, above or below,

"Where's Celestine?" he asked Jude. She led him to the door into the Tabula Rasa's meeting room, where he told them all, "This is something for me to do, brother to brother."

"I'm not afraid," Monday piped up.

"No, but I am," Gentle said with a smile. "And I wouldn't want you to see me piss my pants. Stay up here. I'll be out double quick."

"Make sure you are," Clem said. "Or we're coming down to get you."

With that promise as comfort, Gentle slipped through the door into what remained of Roxborough's house. Though he'd felt nothing in the way of memories as he'd entered the tower, he felt them now. They weren't as material as those that visited him in Gamut Street, where the very boards seemed to have recorded the souls that had trodden them. These were vague recollections of the times he'd drunk and debated around the great oak table. He didn't allow nostalgia to delay him, however, but passed through the room like a man vexed by admirers, arms raised against their blandishments, and headed down into the cellar. He'd had this labyrinth and its contents (all spined and skin-bound, whether human or not) described to him by Jude, but the sight still amazed him. All this wisdom, buried in darkness. Was it any wonder the Imagical life of the Fifth had been so anemic in the last two centuries, when all the liquors that might have fortified it had been hidden here?

But he hadn't come to browse, glorious as that prospect was. He'd come for Celestine, who'd trailed, of all things, the name Nisi Nirvana to bring him here. He didn't know why. Though he vaguely remembered the name, and knew there was some story to go with it, he could neither remember the tale nor recall whose knee he'd first heard it at. Perhaps she knew the answer.

There was a wonderful agitation here. Even the dust would not lie down and die, but moved in giddy constella-

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tions, which he divided as he strode. He made no false turns, but the route from the steps to the place where Celestine lay was still a long one, and before he'd reached it he heard a cry. It wasn't a woman's cry, he thought, but the echoes disfigured it, and he couldn't be certain. He picked up his speed, turning corner after corner, knowing as he went that his other had preceded him every step of the way. There were no further cries after the first, but as his destination came in view—it looked like a cave, raggedly dug from the wall; an oracle's home—he heard a different sound: that of bricks, grinding their gritty faces together. There were small but constant falls of dried mortar from the ceiling, and a subtle trembling in the ground. He started up over the litter of fallen rock, which was strewn like a battlefield with gutted books, to the inviting crack. As he did so he caught a glimpse of a violent motion inside, which had him to the threshold in a stumbling rush.

"Brother?" he said, even before he'd found Sartori in the gloom. "What are you doing?"

Now he saw his other, closing on the woman in the corner of the cave. She was almost naked, but far

from defenseless. Ribbons, like the rags of a bridal train but made of her flesh, were springing from her shoulders and back, their power clearly more substantial than their delicacy implied. Some were clinging to the wall above her head, but the bulk were extended towards Sartori and wrapped around his head like a smothering hood. He clawed at them, working his fingers between them to get a better grip. Fluid ran from the gouged flesh, and cobs of matter came away in his fists. It could only be a matter of time before he released himself, and when he did he'd do her no little harm.

Gentle didn't call to his brother a second time. What was the use? The man was deafened. Instead, he crossed the cave at a stumbling rush and took hold of Sartori from behind, dragging his brother's arms from their maiming work and pinning them to his sides. As he did so he saw Celestine's gaze go between the two figures in front of her, and either the shock of what she was witnessing or her exhaustion took its toll on her strength. The wounded ribbons

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loosened and fell in wreaths around Sartori's neck, uncovering the other face and confirming Celestine in her distress. She withdrew the ribbons entirely, gathering them into her lap.

With his sight returned, Sartori wrenched his head around to identify his captor. Seeing Gentle, he instantly gave up his struggle to free himself and stood in the Reconciler's arms, quite pacified.

"Why do I always find you doing harm, brother?" Gentle asked him.

"Brother?" said Sartori. "Since when was it brother?"

"That's what we are."

"You tried to kill me in Yzordderrex, or have you forgotten? Has something changed?"

"Yes," said Gentle, "I have."

"Oh?"

"I'm ready to accept our... kinship."

"A fine word."

"In fact, I accept my responsibility for everything I was, am, or will be. I've got your Oviate to thank for that."

"That's good to hear," Sartori said. "Especially in this company."

He looked back at Celestine. She was still standing, though it was plainly the filaments hugging the wall that held her up, not her legs. Her eyes were flickering closed, and there were tremors running through her body. Gentle knew she needed aid, but he could do nothing while he was burdened with Sartori, so he turned and pitched his brother towards the cave door. Sartori went from him like a doll, only raising his arms to break his fall at the very last.

"Help her if you want," he said, staring back at Gentle with slackened features. "It's no skin off my nose."

Then he lifted himself up. For an instant Gentle thought he intended some reprisal, and drew breath to

defend himself.

But the other simply said, "I'm on my belly, brother. Would you harm me here?"

As if to prove how low he'd fallen and was willing to stay,

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he began to slink over the earth, like a snake driven from a hearth.

"You're welcome to her," he said, and disappeared into the brighter murk beyond the door.

Celestine's eyes had closed by the time Gentle looked back, her body hanging limply from the tenacious ribbons. He went towards her, but as he approached her lids flickered open,

"No..." she said. "I don't want... you... near... me."

Could he blame her? One man with his face had already attempted murder, or violation, or both. Why should she trust another? Nor was this any time to be pleading his innocence; she needed help, not apology. The question was, from whom? Jude had made it clear on the way up that she'd been sent from this woman's side the same way he was being sent. Perhaps Clem could nurse the woman.

"I'll send somebody to help you," he said, and headed out into the passageway.

Sartori had disappeared: lifted himself off his belly and taken to his heels. Once again Gentle went in his footsteps, back towards the stairs. He'd covered half that distance when Jude, Clem, and Monday appeared. Their frowns evaporated when they saw Gentle.

"We thought he'd murdered you," Jude said. "He didn't touch me. But he's hurt Celestine, and she won't let me near her. Clem, will you see if you can help? But be careful. She may look sick, but she's strong."

"Where is she?"

"Jude'll take you. I'm going after Sartori."

"He's gone up the tower," Monday said.

"He didn't even look at us," Jude said. She sounded almost offended. "He just stumbled out and up the stairs. What the hell did you do to him?"

"Nothing."

"I never saw an expression like that on his face before. Or yours, come to that."

"Like what?"

"Tragic," said Clem.

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"Maybe we're going to win a quicker victory than I thought," Gentle said, starting past them to the stairs.

"Wait," Jude said. "We can't tend to Celestine here. We need to take her somewhere safer."

"Agreed."

"The studio, maybe?"

"No," Gentle said. "There's a house I know in Clerken-well where we'll be safe. He drove me out of it once. But it's mine, and we're going back to it. AH of us."

15

I

The sun that met Gentle in the foyer put him in mind of Taylor, whose wisdom, spoken through a sleeping boy, had begun this day. That dawn already seemed an age ago, the hours since then had been so filled with journeys and revelations. It would be this way until the Reconciliation, he knew. The London he'd wandered in his first years, brimming with possibilities—a city Pie had once said hid more angels than God's skirts—was once again a place of presences, and he rejoiced in the fact. It gave heat to his heels as he mounted the stairs, two and three at a time. Strange as it was, he was actually eager to see Sartori's face again: to speak with his other and know his mind.

Jude had prepared him for what he'd find on the top floor: bland corridors leading to the Tabula Rasa's table, and the body sprawled there. The scent of Godolphin's undoing was there to meet him as he stepped into the passage: a sickening reminder, though he scarcely needed one, that revelation had a grimmer face and that those last halcyon days, when he'd been the most lauded metaphysician in Europe, had ended in atrocity. It would not happen again, he swore to himself. Last time the ceremonies had been brought to grief by the brother waiting for him at the end of this corridor, and if he had to commit fratricide to

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remove the danger of a recurrence, then so be it. Sartori was the spirit of his own imperfections made flesh. To kill him would be a cleansing, and welcome, perhaps, to them both.

As he advanced along the corridor the sickly smell of Godolphin's putrefaction grew stronger. He held his breath against it and came to the door in utter silence. It nevertheless swung open as he approached, his own voice inviting him in.

"There's no harm in here, brother; not from me. And I don't need you on your belly to prove your good intentions."

Gentle stepped inside. All the drapes were drawn against the sun, but even the sturdiest fabric usually let some trace of light through its weave. Not so here. The room was sealed by something more than curtains and brick, and Sartori was sitting in this darkness, his form visible only because the door was ajar.

"Will you sit?" he said. "I know this isn't a very whole-some slab"—the body of Oscar Godolphin had gone, the mess of his blood and rot remaining in pools and smears—"but I like the formality. We should negotiate like civilized beings, yes?"

Gentle acceded to this, walking to the other end of the table and sitting down, content to demonstrate good faith unless or until Sartori showed signs of treachery. Then he'd be swift and calamitous.

"Where did the body go?" he asked.

"It's here. I'll bury it after we've talked. This is no place for a man to rot. Or maybe it's the perfect place, I don't know. We can vote on it later."

"Suddenly you're a democrat."

"You said you were changing. So am I."

"Any particular reason?"

"We'll get to that later. First—"

He glanced towards the door, and it swung closed, plunging them both into utter darkness.

"You don't mind, do you?" Sartori said. "This isn't a conversation we should have looking at ourselves. The mirror's bad enough."

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"You didn't mind in Yzordderrex."

"I was incarnate there. Here I feel... immaterial. I was really impressed by what you did in Yzordderrex, by the way. One word from you, and it just crumbled away."

"Your handiwork, not mine."

"Oh, don't be obtuse. You know what history'll say. It won't give a fuck about the politics. It'll say the Reconciler arrived, and the walls came tumbling down. And you're not going to argue with that. It feeds the legend; it makes you look messianic. That's what you really want, isn't it? The question is: if you're the Reconciler, *what am I?* "

"We don't have to be enemies."

"Didn't I say the very same thing in Yzordderrex? And didn't you try and murder me?"

"I had good reason."

"Name one."

"You destroyed the first Reconciliation."

"It wasn't the first. There've been three other attempts to my certain knowledge."

"It was my first. My Great Work. And you destroyed it."

"Who did you hear that from?"

"From Lucius Cobbitt," Gentle replied.

There was a silence then, and in it Gentle thought he heard the darkness move, a sound like silk on silk. But his head was never quite silent these days, and before he could clear a path through the whispers Sartori had recovered his equilibrium.

"So Lucius is alive," he said.

"Just in memory. In Gamut Street."

"That fuckhead Little Ease let you have quite an education, didn't he? I'll have his guts." He sighed. "I miss Rosengarten, you know. He was so very loyal. And Racio and Mattalaus. I had some good people in Yzordderex. People I could trust; people who loved me. It's the face, I think; it inspires devotion. You must have noticed that. Is it the divine in you, or is it just the way we smile? I resist the notion that one's a symptom of the other. Hunchbacks can be saints and beauties perfect monsters. Haven't you found that?"

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"Certainly."

"You see how much we agree? We sit here in the dark, and we talk like friends. I truly think if we never again stepped out into the light we could learn to love each other, after a time."

"That can't happen."

"Why not?"

"Because I've work to do, and I won't let you delay me."

"You did terrible harm last time, Maestro. Remember that. Put it in your mind's eye. Remember how it looked, seeing the In Ovo spilling out...."

By the sound of Sartori's voice, Gentle guessed that the man had risen to his feet. But again it was difficult to be certain, when the darkness was so profound. He stood up himself, his chair tipping over behind him.

"The In Ovo's a filthy place," Sartori was saying. "And believe me, I don't want it dirtying up this Dominion. But I'm afraid that may be inevitable."

Now Gentle was certain there was some duplicity here. Sartori's voice no longer had a single source but was being subtly disseminated throughout the room, as though he was seeping into the darkness.

"If you leave this room, brother—if you leave me alone—there'll be such horror unleashed on the Fifth."

"I won't make any errors this time."

"Who's talking about error?" Sartori said. "I'm talking about what I'll do for righteousness' sake, if you desert me."

"So come with me."

"What for? To be your disciple? Listen to what you're saying! I've got as much right to be called Messiah as you. Why should I be a piddling acolyte? Do me the courtesy of understanding that, at least."

"So do I have to kill you?"

"You can try."

"I'm ready to do it, brother, if you force me."

"So am I. So am I."

There was no purpose in further debate, Gentle thought. If he was going to kill the man, as it seemed he must, he wanted to do it swiftly and cleanly. But he needed light for

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the deed. He moved towards the door, intending to open it, but as he did so something touched his face. He put his hand up to snatch it away, but it had already gone, flitting towards the ceiling. What defense was this? He'd sensed nothing when he'd entered the room, other than Sartori. The darkness had been inert. Either it had now taken on some illusory life as an extension of Sartori's will, or else his other had used the darkness as a cover for some summoning. But what? There'd been no evocations spoken, no hint of a feat. If he'd managed to call up some defender, it was flimsy and witless. He heard it flapping against the ceiling like a blinded bird.

"I thought we were alone," he said. "Our last conversation needs witnesses, or how would the world know I gave you a chance to save it?" "Biographers, now?" "Not exactly...."

"What then?" Gentle said, his outstretched hand reaching the wall and sliding along it towards the door. "Why don't you show me?" he said, his palm closing around the handle. "Or are you too ashamed?"

With this, he pulled not one but both doors open. The phenomenon that followed was more startling than dire. The meager light in the passageway outside was drawn into the room in a rush, as though it were milk, sucked from day's teat to feed what waited inside. It flew past him, dividing as it went, going to a dozen places around the room, high and low. Then the handles were snatched from Gentle's grip, and the doors slammed.

He turned back to face the room and as he did so heard the table being thrown over. Some of the light had been drawn to what lay beneath. There was Godolphin, gutted, his entrails splayed around him, his kidneys laid on his eyes, his heart at his groin. And skittering around his body, some of the entities this arrangement had called forth, carrying fragments of the light stolen through the door. None of them made much sense to Gentle's eye. They had no limbs recognizable as such, nor any trace of features, nor, in most cases, heads upon which features might have sat. They were

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scraps of nonsense, some strung together like the cloggings of a drain, and mindlessly busy, others lying like bloated fruit, splitting and splitting and showing themselves seedless.

Gentle looked towards Sartori. He hadn't taken any light for himself, but a loop of wormy life hung over

his head and cast its baleful brightness down.

"What have you done?" Gentle asked him.

"There are workings a Reconciler would never stoop to know. This is one. These beasts are Oviates. Peripeteria. You can't raise the weightier beasts with a corpse that's cold. But these things know how to be compliant, and that's all either you or I have ever really asked for from our abettors, isn't it? Or our loved ones, come to that."

"Well, you've shown me them now," Gentle said. "You can send them home."

"Oh, no, brother. I want you to know what they can do. They're the least of the least, but they've got some maddening tricks."

Sartori glanced up, and the loop of wretchedness above him went from its cherished place, moving towards Gentle, then to the ground, its target not the living but the dead. It was around Godolphin's neck in moments, while in the air above it an alliance of its fellows formed, congealing into a peristaltic cloud. The loop tightened like a noose and rose, hauling Godolphin up. The kidneys fell from his eyes; they were open beneath. The heart dropped from his groin; there was a wound where his manhood had been. Then the remaining innards spilled from his carcass, preserved in a jelly of cold blood. The peripeteria overhead offered themselves as a gallows for the ascending noose and, having it in their midst, rose again, so that the dead man's feet were pulled clear off the ground.

"This is obscene, Sartori," Gentle said. "Stop it."

"It's not very pretty, is it? But think, brother, *think* what an army of them could do. You couldn't even heal this single little horror, never mind this a thousandfold." He paused, then said, with genuine inquiry in his voice, "Or

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could you? Could you raise poor Oscar? From the dead, I mean. Could you do that?"

He left his place at the other end of the room and moved towards Gentle, the look on his face, lit by the gallows, one of exhilaration at this possibility. "If you could do that," he said, "I swear I'd be your perfect disciple. I would."

He was past the hanged man now and coming within a yard or two of Gentle. "I swear," he said again.

"Let him down."

"Why?"

"Because it's pointless and pathetic."

"Maybe that's what I am," Sartori said. "Maybe that's what I've been from the beginning, and I never had the wit to realize it."

This was a new tack, Gentle thought. Five minutes before the man had been demanding due respect as an aspiring Messiah; now he was wallowing in self-abnegation.

"I've had so many dreams, brother. Oh, the cities I've imagined! The empires! But I could never quite remove the nagging doubt, you know? The worm at the back of the skull that keeps saying, 'It'll come to nothing, it'll come to nothing.' And you know what? The worm was right. All I ever attempted was doomed from the beginning, because of what we are to each other."

Tragic, Clem had said, describing the look on Sartori's face as he'd fled the cellar. And perhaps in his way he was. But what had he learned, that had brought him so low? It had to be goaded out of him, now or never.

"I saw your empire," Gentle replied. "It didn't fall apart because there was some judgment on it. You built it out of shit. That's why it collapsed."

"But don't you see? That *was* the judgment. I was the architect, and I was also the judge who found it unworthy. I was set against myself from the beginning, and I never realized it."

"But you realize it now?"

"It couldn't be plainer."

"Why? Do you see yourself in this filth? Is that it?"

"No, brother," Sartori said. "It's when I look at you—"

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"At me?"

Sartori stared at him, tears beginning to fill his eyes. "She thought I was you," he murmured.

"Judith?"

"Celestine. She didn't know there were two of us. How could she? So when she saw me she was pleased. At first, anyway."

There was a weight of pain in his speech Gentle hadn't anticipated, and it was no pretense. Sartori was suffering like a damned man.

"Then she smelled me," he went on. "She said I stank of evil, and I disgusted her."

"Why should you care?" Gentle said. "You wanted to kill her anyway."

"No," he protested. "That wasn't what I wanted at all. I wouldn't have laid a finger on her if she hadn't attacked me."

"You're suddenly very loving."

"Of course."

"I don't see why."

"Didn't you say we were brothers?"

"Yes."

"Then she's my mother too. Don't I have some right to be loved by her?"

"Mother?"

"Yes. Mother. She's your mother, Gentle. She was raped by the Unbeheld, and you're the consequence."

Gentle was too shocked to reply. His mind was gathering puzzles from far and wide—all of them solved by this revelation—and the solving filled him to brimming.

Sartori wiped his face with the heels of his hands. "I was born to be the Devil, brother," he said. "Hell to your Heaven. Do you see? Every plan I ever laid, every ambition I ever had, is a mockery, because the part of me that's yours wants love and glory and great works, and the part of me that's our Father knows it's shite and brings it down. I'm my own destroyer, brother. All I can do is live with destruction, until the end of the world."

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In the foyer six stories below, Celestine's rescuers had, after much coaxing, persuaded the woman out of the labyrinth and into the light. Weak though she'd been when Clem had entered her cell, she'd resisted his consolations for a good while, telling him that she wanted no part of them. She preferred to remain underground, she said, and perish there.

His experience on the streets had given him a way with such recalcitrance. He didn't argue with her, nor did he leave. He bided his time at the threshold, telling her she was probably right; there was nothing to be gained from seeing the sun.

After a while she balked at this, telling him that wasn't her opinion at all and if he had any decency about him he'd give her some comfort in her distress. Did he want her to die like an animal, she said, locked away in the dark? He then allowed that the fault was his, and if she wanted to be taken up into the outside world, he'd do what he could.

With his tactic successful, he sent Monday off to bring Jude's car to the front of the tower and began the business of getting Celestine out. There was a delicate moment at the door of the cell when the woman, setting eyes on Jude, almost recanted her desire to leave, saying she wanted no truck with this tainted creature. Jude kept her silence, and Clem, tact personified, sent her up to fetch blankets from the car while he escorted Celestine to the stairs. It was a slow business, and several times she asked him to stop, holding on to him fiercely and telling him that she wasn't trembling because she was afraid, but because her body was unused to such freedom, and that if anybody, particularly the tainted woman, was to remark on these tremors, he was to hush them.

Thus, clinging to Clem one moment, then demanding he not lean on her the next, slowing at times, then rising up with preternatural strength in her sinews the instant after,

Roxborough's captive quit her prison after two centuries of incarceration, and went up to meet the day.

But the tower's sum of surprises, whether above or below, was not yet exhausted. As Clem escorted her across the foyer, he stopped, his eyes on the door ahead, or rather on the sunlight that poured through it. It was laden with motes: pollen and seeds from the trees and plants outside; dust from the road beyond. Though there was scarcely a breeze outside, they were in lively motion.

"We've got a visitor," he remarked.

"Here?" Jude said.

"Up ahead."

She looked at the light. Though she could see nothing that resembled a human form in it, the particles were not moving arbitrarily. There was some organizing principle among them, and Gem, it seemed, knew its name.

"Taylor," he said, his voice thick with feeling. "Taylor's here."

He glanced across at Monday, who without being told stepped in to take Celestine's weight. The woman had been hovering on unconsciousness again, but now she raised her head and watched, as did they all, while Clem started to walk towards the light-filled door.

"It's you, isn't it?" he said softly.

In reply, the motion in the light became more agitated.

"I thought so," Clem said, coming to a halt a couple of yards from the edge of the pool.

"What does he want?" Jude said. "Can you tell?"

Clem glanced back at her, his expression both awed and afraid.

"He wants me to let him in," he replied. "He wants to be here." He tapped his chest. "Inside me."

Jude smiled. The day had brought little in the way of good news, but here was some: the possibility of a union she'd never have believed possible. Still Clem hesitated, keeping his distance from the light.

"I don't know if I can do it," he said.

"He's not going to hurt you," Jude said.

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"I know," Clem said, glancing back at the light. Its gilded dust was more hectic than ever. "It's not the hurt..."

"What then?"

He shook his head.

"I did it, man," Monday said. "Just close your eyes and think of England."

This earned a little laugh from Clem, who was still staring at the light when Jude voiced the final persuasion.

"You loved him," she said.

The laugh caught in Clem's throat, and in the utter hush that followed he murmured, "I still do."

"Then be with him."

He looked back at her one last time and smiled. Then he stepped into the light.

To Jude's eyes there was nothing so remarkable about the sight. It was just a door, and a man stepping through it into sunlight. But there was significance in it now she'd never understood before, and as she stood witness a warning of Oscar's returned to her head, spoken as they'd prepared to leave for Yzordderrex. She'd come back changed, he'd said, seeing the world she'd left with clearer eyes. Here was proof of that. Perhaps sunlight had always been numinous, and doorways signs of a greater passage than that of one room to another. But she'd not seen it, until now.

Clem stood in the beams for perhaps thirty seconds, his hands palm up in front of him. Then he turned back toward her, and she saw that Taylor had come with him. If she'd been asked to name the places where she saw his presence, she couldn't have done so. There was no change in his physiognomy, no particular in which they could be seen, unless it was in signs so subtle—the angle of his head, the fixedness of his mouth—that she couldn't distinguish them. But he was there, no doubt of it. And so was an urgency that had not been in Clem a minute before.

"Take Celestine out of here," he said to Jude and Monday. "There's something terrible going on upstairs."

He left the doorway, heading for the stairs.

"Do you want help?" Jude said.

"No. Stay with her. She needs you."

At this, Celestine uttered her first words since leaving the cell. "I don't need her," she said.

Clem reeled around on one heel, coming back to the woman and putting his nose an inch from hers.

"You know, I'm finding you hard to like, madam!" he snapped.

Jude laughed out loud, hearing Tay's irascible tones so clearly. She'd forgotten how his and Clem's natures had dovetailed, before sickness had taken the piss and vinegar out of Tay.

"We're here because of you, remember that," Tay said. "And you'd still be down there picking the fluff from your navel if Judy hadn't brought us."

Celestine narrowed her eyes. "Put me back, then," she said.

"Just for that"—Jude held her breath; he wouldn't, surely?—"I'm going to give you a big kiss and ask you very politely to stop being a cantankerous old bag." He kissed her on the nose. "Now let's get going," he said to Monday, and before Celestine could summon a reply he headed to the stairs and was up them and out of sight.

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Exhausted by his outpouring of pain, Sartori turned from Gentle and began to wander back to the chair where he'd been sitting at the start of their interview. He idled as he went, kicking over those servile scraps that came to dote on him and pausing to look up at Godolphin's gutted body, then setting it in motion with a touch, so that its bulk eclipsed and uncovered him by turns, as he went to his little throne. There were peripetria gathered around in a sycophantic horde, but Gentle didn't wait for him to order them against him. Sartori was no less dangerous for the despair he'd just expressed; all it did was free him from any last hope of peace between them. It freed Gentle too. This had to end in Sartori's dispatch, or the Devil he'd decided to bewould undo the Great Work all over again. Gentle drew

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breath. As soon as his brother turned he'd let the pneuma fly and be done.

"What makes you think you can kill me, brother?" Sartori said, still not turning. "God's in the First Dominion, and Mother's nearly dead downstairs. You're alone. All you have is your breath."

Godolphin's body continued to swing between them, but the man kept his back turned.

"And if you unknit me, what do you do to yourself in the process? Have you thought about that? Kill me, and maybe you kill yourself."

Gentle knew Sartori was capable of planting such doubts all night. It was the complement to his own lost skill with seduction: dropping these possibilities into promising earth. He wouldn't be delayed by them. His pneuma readied, he started after the man, pausing only for the swing of Godolphin's corpse, then stopping on the other side of it. Sartori still refused to show his face, and Gentle had no option but to waste a little of the killing breath with words.

"Look at me, brother," he said.

He read the intention to do so in Sartori's body, a motion beginning in his heels and torso and head. But before his face came in sight Gentle heard a sound behind him and glanced back to see the third actor here—the dead Godolphin—dropping from his gallows. He had time to glimpse the Oviates in the carcass; then it was upon him. It should have been easy to stand aside, but the beasts had done more than nest in the corpse. They were busy in Godolphin's rotted muscle, engineering the resurrection Sartori had begged Gentle to perform. The corpse's arms snatched hold of him, and its bulk, all the vaster for the weight of parasites, bore him to his knees. The breath went out of him as harmless air, and before he could take another his arms were caught and twisted to breaking point behind his back.

"Never turn your back on a dead man," Sartori said, finally showing his face.

There was no triumph on it, though he'd incapacitated his enemy in one swift maneuver. He turned his sorrowful eyes up to the host of peripetria that had been Godolphin's

gallows and, with the thumb of his left hand, described a tiny circle. They took their cue instantly, the motion appearing in their cloud.

"I'm more superstitious than you, brother," Sartori said, reaching behind him and throwing over his chair. It didn't lie where it fell, but rolled on around the room as though the motion overhead had some correspondence below. "I'm not going to lay a hand on you," he went on. "In case there *is* some consequence for a man who takes his other's life." He raised his palms. "Look, I'm blameless," he said, stepping back towards the draped windows. "You're going to die because the world is coming apart."

While he spoke the motion around Gentle increased, as the peripetria took their summoner's cue. They were in substantial as individuals, but en masse they had considerable authority. As their circling speeded up, it generated a current strong enough to lift the chair Sartori had overthrown into the air. The light fixtures were sheared off the walls, taking cobs of plaster with them; the handles were ripped from the doors; and the rest of the chairs snatched up to join the tarantella, smashed to firewood as they collided with each other. Even the table, enormous as it was, began to move. At the eye of this storm Gentle struggled to free himself from Godolphin's cold embrace. He might have done so, given time, but the circle and its freight of shards closed on him too quickly. Unable to protect himself, all he could do was bow his head against the hail of wood, plaster, and glass, the breath pummeled from him by the assault. Only once did he lift his eyes to look for Sartori through the storm. His brother stood flat against the wall, his head thrown back as he watched the execution. If there was any feeling on his face, it was that of a man offended by what he saw, a lamb obliged to watch helplessly as his companion was pulped.

It seemed he didn't hear the voice raised in the corridor outside, but Gentle did. It was Clem, calling the Maestro's name and beating on the door. Gentle didn't have the strength left to reply. His body sagged in Godolphin's arms as the fusillade increased, striking his skull and rib cage and

thighs. Clem, God love him, didn't need an answering call. He slammed himself against the door repeatedly, and the lock suddenly burst, throwing both doors open at once.

There was more light outside than in, of course, and just as before it was drawn into the darkened room at a rush, sweeping past the astonished Clem. The peripetria were as desperate as ever to have a sliver of illumination for themselves, and their swirling ranks fell into confusion at the appearance of the light. Gentle felt the hold on him loosen as those Oviates who'd quickened Godolphin's corpse left off their labors and went to join the melee. With the energies in the room diverted, the circling wreckage began to lose momentum, but not before a piece of the splintered table struck one of the open doors, sheering it off at the hinges. Clem saw the collision coming and retreated before he too was struck, his shout of alarm stirring Sartori.

Gentle looked towards his brother. He'd left off his sham of innocence and was studying the stranger in the hallway with gleaming eyes. He didn't leave his place at the wall, however. A rain of wreckage was falling now, littering the room from end to end, and he clearly had no desire to step into it. Instead he reached up to snatch a uredo from his eye, intending to strike Clem down before he could intervene

again.

Godolphin's bulk was doubling Gentle over, but he restrained to raise himself from beneath it, yelling a warning to Clem, who was back at the threshold now, as he did so. Clem heard the shout and saw Sartori snatch at his eye. Though he had no knowledge of what the gesture meant, he was quick to defend himself, ducking behind the surviving door as the killing blow flew his way. In the same instant, Gentle heaved himself to his feet, throwing off Godolphin's body. He glanced in Clem's direction to be certain his friend had survived and, seeing that he had, started towards Sartori. He had breath in his body now, and might easily have dispatched a pneuma at his enemy. But his hands wanted more than air in them. They wanted flesh; they wanted bone.

Careless of the trash that was both underfoot and falling

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from the air, he ran at his brother, who sensed his approach and turned his way. Gentle had time to see the face before him smile a feral welcome; then he was upon him. His momentum carried them both back against the drapes. The window behind Sartori shattered, and the rail above him broke, bringing the curtain down.

This time the light that filled the room was a blaze, and it felt directly on Gentle's face. He was momentarily blinded, but his body still knew its business. He pushed his brother to the sill and hauled him up over it. Sartori reached for a handhold and snatched at the fallen drape, but its folds were of little use. The cloth tore as he tipped backwards, carried over the sill by his brother's arms. Even then he fought to keep himself from falling, but Gentle gave him no quarter. Sartori flailed for a moment, scrabbling at the air. Then he was gone from Gentle's hands, his scream going with him, down and down and down.

Gentle didn't see the fall and was glad of it. Only when the cry stopped did he retreat from the window and cover his face, while the circle of the sun blazed blue and green and red behind his lids. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to devastation. The only whole thing in the room was Clem, and even he was the worse for wear. He'd picked himself up and was watching the Oviates, who'd fought so vehemently for a piece of light, withering for excess of it. Their matter was drab slough, their skitters and flights reduced to a wretched crawling retreat from the window.

"I've seen prettier turds," Gem remarked.

Then he started around the room, pulling all the rest of the drapes down, the dust he raised making the sun solid as it came and leaving no shadow for the peripetria to retreat to.

"Taylor's here," he said, when the job was done.

"In the sun?"

"Better than that," Clem replied. "In my head. We think you need guardian angels, Maestro."

"So do I," said Gentle. "Thank you. Both."

He turned back to the window and looked down at the wasteland into which Sartori had fallen. He didn't expect to

see a body there; nor did he. Sartori hadn't survived all those years as Autarch without finding a hundred feits to protect his flesh.

They met Monday, who had heard the window breaking above, coming up the stairs as they descended.

"I thought you was a goner, boss," he said.

"Almost," came the reply.

"What do we do about Godolphin?" Clem said as the trio headed down, together.

"We don't need to do anything," Gentle said. "There's an open window—"

"I don't think he's going to be flying anywhere."

"No, but the birds can get to him," Gentle said lightly. "Better to fatten birds than worms."

"There's a morbid sense in that, I suppose," Clem said.

"And how's Celestine?" Gentle asked the boy.

"She's in the car, all wrapped up and not saying very much. I don't think she likes the sun."

"After two hundred years in the dark, I'm not surprised. We'll make her comfortable once we get to Gamut Street. She's a great lady, gentlemen. She's also my mother."

"So that's where you get your bloody-mindedness from," Tay remarked.

"How safe is this house we're going to?" Monday asked.

"If you mean how do we stop Sartori getting in, I don't think we can."

They'd reached the foyer, which was as sun-filled as ever.

"So what do you think the bastard's going to do?" Clem wondered.

"He won't come back here, I'm sure of that," Gentle said. "I think he'll wander the city for a while. But sooner or later he'll be driven back to where he belongs."

"Which is where?"

Gentle opened his arms. "Here," he said.

There was surely no more haunted thoroughfare in London that blistering afternoon than Gamut Street.

Neither those locations in the city famous for their phantoms, nor those anonymous spots—known only to psychics and children—where revenants gathered, boasted more souls eager to debate events in the place of their decease as that backwater in Clerkenwell. While few human eyes, even those ready for the marvelous (and the car that turned into Gamut Street at a little past four o'clock contained several such eyes), could see the phantoms as solid entities, their presence was clear enough, marked by the cold, still places in the shimmering haze rising off the road and by the stray dogs that gathered in such numbers at the corners, drawn by the high whistlesome of the dead were wont to make. Thus Gamut Street cooked in a heat of its own, its stew potent with spirits.

Gentle had warned them all that there was no comfort to be had at the house. It was without furniture, water, or electricity. But the past was there, he said, and it would be a comfort to them all, after their time in the enemy's tower.

"I remember this house," Jude said as she emerged from the car.

"We should both be careful," Gentle warned, as he climbed the steps. "Sartori left one of his Oviates inside, and it nearly drove me crazy. I want to get rid of it before we all go in."

"I'm coming with you," Jude said, following him to the door.

"I don't think that's wise," he said. "Let me deal with Little Ease first."

"That's Sartori's beast?"

"Yes."

"Then I'd like to see it. Don't worry, it's not going to

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hurt me. I've got a little of its Maestro right here, remember?" She laid her hand upon her belly. "I'm safe."

Gentle made no objection but stood aside to let Monday force the door, which he did with the efficiency of a practiced thief. Before the boy had even retreated down the steps again, Jude was over the threshold, braving the stale, cold air.

"Wait up," Gentle said, following her into the hallway,

"What does this creature look like?" she wanted to know.

"Like an ape. Or a baby. I don't know. It talks a lot, I'm certain of that much."

"Little Ease ..-."

"That's right."

"Perfect name for a place like this."

She'd reached the bottom of the stairs and was staring up towards the Meditation Room.

"Be careful," Gentle said.

"I heard you the first time."

"I don't think you quite understand how powerful—"

"I was born up there, wasn't I?" she said, her tone aschilly as the air. He didn't reply; not until she swung around and asked him again. "Wasn't I?"

"Yes."

Nodding, she returned to her study of the stairs. "You said the past was waiting here," she said.

"Yes."

"My past too?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"I don't feel anything. It's like a bloody graveyard. A few vague recollections, that's all."

"They'll come."

"You're very certain."

"We have to be whole, Jude."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We have to be...reconciled . . . with everything we ever were before we can go on."

"Suppose I don't want to be reconciled? Suppose I want to invent myself all over again, starting now?"

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"You can't do it," he said simply. "We have to be whole before we can get home."

"If that's home," she said, nodding in the direction of the Meditation Room, "you can keep it."

"I don't mean the cradle."

"What then?"

"The place before the cradle. Heaven."

"Fuck Heaven. I haven't got Earth sorted out yet."

"You don't need to."

"Let me be the judge of that. I haven't even had a life I could call my own, and you're ready to slot me

into the grand design. Well, I don't think I want to go. I want to be my own design."

"You can be. As part of—"

"Part of nothing. I want to be me. A law unto myself."

"That isn't you talking. It's Sartori."

"What if it is?"

"You know what he's done," Gentle replied. "The atrocities. What are you doing taking lessons from him?"

"When I should be taking them from you, you mean? Since when were you so damn perfect?" He made no reply, and she took his silence as further sign of his new high-mindedness. "Oh, so you're not going to stoop to mudslinging, is that it?"

"We'll debate it later," he said.

"Debate it?" she mocked. "What are you going to give us, Maestro, an ethics lesson? I want to know what makes you so damn rare."

"I'm Celestine's son," he said quietly.

She stared at him, agog. "You're what?"

"Celestine's son. She was taken from the Fifth—"

"I know where she was taken. Dowd did it. I thought he'd told me the whole story."

"Not this part?"

"Not this part."

"There were kinder ways to tell you. I'm sorry I didn't find one."

"No," she said. "Where better?"

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Her gaze went back up the stairs. When she spoke again, which was not for a little time, it was in a whisper.

"You're lucky," she said. "Home and Heaven are the same place."

"Maybe that's true for us all," he murmured.

"I doubt it."

A long silence followed, punctuated only by Monday's forlorn attempts to whistle on the step outside.

At last, Jude said, "I can see now why you're so desperate to get all this right. You're... how does it go? ... you're about your Father's business."

"I hadn't thought of it quite like that...."

"But you are."

"I suppose I am. I just hope I'm equal to it, that's all. One minute I feel it's all possible. The next..."

He studied her, while outside Monday attempted the tune afresh.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he said.

"I'm thinking I wish I'd kept your love letters," she replied.

There was another aching pause; then she turned from him and wandered off towards the back of the house. Helingered at the bottom of the stairs, thinking he should probably go with her, in case Sartori's agent was hiding there, but he was afraid to bruise her further with his scrutiny. He glanced back towards the open door and the sunlight on the step. Safety wasn't far from her, if she needed it.

"How's it going?" he called to Monday.

"Hot," came the reply. "Clem's gone to fetch some food and beer. Lots of beer. We should have a party, boss. We fuckin' deserve it, don't we?"

"We do. How's Celestine?"

"She's asleep. Is it okay to come in yet?"

"Just a little while longer," Gentle replied. "But keep up the whistling, will you? There's a tune in there somewhere."

Monday laughed, and the sound, which was utterly commonplace of course, yet as unlikely as whale song, pleased him. If Little Ease was still in the house, Gentle thought, his malice could do no great harm on a day as miraculous as

this. Comforted, he set off up the stairs, wondering as he went if perhaps the daylight had shooed all the memories into hiding. But before he was halfway up the flight, he had proof that they hadn't. The phantom form of Lucius Cob-bitt, conjured in his mind's eye, appeared beside him, snotty, tearful, and desperate for wisdom. Moments later, the sound of his own voice, offering the advice he'd given the boy that last, terrible night.

"Study nothing except in the knowledge that you already knew it. Worship nothing..."

But before he'd completed the second dictum, the phrase was taken up by a mellifluous voice from above.

"... except in adoration of your true self. And fear nothing..."

The figment of Lucius Cobbitt faded as Gentle continued to climb, but the voice became louder.

". . . except in the certainty that you are your enemy's begetter and its only hope of healing."

And with the voice came the realization that the wisdom he'd bestowed on Lucius had not been his at all. It had originated with the mystif. The door to the Meditation Room was open, and Pie was perched on the sill, smiling out of the past.

"When did you invent that?" the Maestro asked.

"I didn't invent it, I learned it," the mystif replied. "From my mother. And she learned it from her mother, or her father, who knows? Now you can pass it on."

"And what am I?" he asked the mystif. "Your son or your daughter?"

- Pie looked almost abashed. "You're my Maestro."

"Is that all? We're still masters and servants here? Don't

- say that."

: "What should I say?" "What you feel."

"Oh." The mystif smiled. "If I told you what I feel we'd be here all day."

The gleam of mischief in its eye was so endearing, and the memory so real, it was all Gentle could do to prevent himself crossing the room and embracing the space where

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his friend had sat. But there was work to be done—his Father's business, as Jude had called it—and it was more pressing than indulging his memories. When Little Ease had been ousted from the house, then he'd return here and search for a profounder lesson: that of the workings of the Reconciliation. He needed that education quickly, and the echoes here were surely rife with exchanges on the subject.

"I'll be back," he said to the creature on the sill.

"I'll be waiting," it replied.

He glanced back towards it, and the sun, catching the window behind, momentarily ate into its silhouette, showing him not a whole figure but a fragment. His gut turned, as the image called another back to mind, with appalling force: the Erasure, in roiling chaos, and in the air above his head, the howling rags of his beloved, returned into the Second with some words of warning.

"Undone," it had said, as it fought the claim of the Erasure. "*We are... undone.*"

Had he made some placating reply, snatched from his lips by the storm? He didn't remember. But he heard again the mystif telling him to find Sartori, instructing him that his other knew something that he, Gentle, didn't. And then it had gone, been snatched away into the First Dominion and silenced there.

His heart racing, Gentle shook this horror from his head and looked back towards the sill. It was empty now. But -Pie's exhortation to find Sartori was still in his head. Why had that been so important? he wondered. Even if the mystif had somehow discovered the truth of Gentle's origins in the First Dominion and had failed to communicate the fact, it must have known that Sartori was as much in ignorance of the secret as his brother. So what was the knowledge the mystif had believed Sartori possessed, that it had defied the limits of God's Kingdom to spur him into pursuit?

A shout from below had him give up the enigma. Jude was calling out to him. He headed down the stairs at speed, following her voice through the house and into the kitchen, which was large and chilly. Jude was standing close to the window, which had gone to ruin many years ago, giving ac-

cess to the convolvulus from the garden behind, which having entered had rotted in a darkness its own abundance had thickened. The sun could only get pencil beams through this snare of foliage and wood, but they were sufficient to illuminate both the woman and the captive whose head she had pinned beneath her foot. It was Little Ease, his oversized mouth drawn down like a tragic mask, his eyes turned up towards Jude.

"Is this it?" she said.

"This is it."

Little Ease set up a round of thin mewling as Gentle approached, which it turned into words. "I didn't do a thing! You ask her, ask her please, ask her did I do a thing? No, I didn't. Just keeping out of harm's way, I was."

"Sartori's not very happy with you," Gentle said.

"Well, I didn't have a hope," it protested. "Not against the likes of you. Not against a Reconciler."

"So you know that much."

"I do now. 'We have to be whole,' " it quoted, catching Gentle's tone perfectly. " 'We have to be reconciled with everything we ever were—' "

"You were listening."

"I can't help it," the creature said. "I was born inquisitive. I didn't understand it, though," it hastened to add. "I'm not spying, I swear."

"Liar," Jude said. Then to Gentle, "How do we kill it?"

"We don't have to," he said. "Are you afraid, Little Ease?"

"What do you think?"

"Would you swear allegiance to me if you were allowed to live?"

"Where do I sign? Show me the place!"

"You'd let *this* live?" Jude said.

"Yes."

"What for?" she demanded, grinding her heel upon it. "Look at it."

"Don't," Little Ease begged.

"Swear," said Gentle, going down on his haunches beside it.

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"I swear! I swear!"

Gentle looked up at Jude. "Lift your foot," he said.

"You trust it?"

"I don't want death here," he said. "Even this. Let it go, Jude." She didn't move. "I said, *let it go*."

Reluctance in every sinew, she raised her foot half an inch and Little Ease scabbled free, instantly taking hold of Gentle's hand.

"I'm yours, Liberatore," it said, touching its clammy brow to Gentle's palm, "My head's in your hands. By Hyo, by Heretea, by Hapexamendios, I commit my heart to you."

"Accepted," Gentle said, and stood up.

"What should I do now, Liberatore?"

"There's a room at the top of the stairs. Wait for me there."

"For ever and ever."

"A few minutes will do."

It backed off to the door, bowing woosily, then took to its heels.

"How can you trust a thing like that?" Jude said.

"I don't. Not yet."

"But you're willing to try."

"You're damned if you can't forgive, Jude."

"You could forgive Sartori, could you?" she said.

"He's me, he's my brother, and he's my child," Gentle replied. "How could I not?"

With the house made safe, the rest of the company moved in. Monday, ever the scavenger, went off to scour the neighboring houses and streets in search of whatever he could find to offer some modicum of comfort. He returned three times with bounty, the third time taking Clem off with him. They returned half an hour later with two mattresses and armfuls of bed linen, all too clean to have been found abandoned,

"I missed my vocation," Clem said, with Tay's mischief in his features. "Burglary's much more fun than banking."

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At this juncture Monday requested permission to borrow Jude's car and drive back to the South Bank, there to collect the belongings he'd left behind in his haste to follow Gentle. She told him yes, but urged him to return as fast as possible. Though it was still bright on the street outside, they would need as many strong arms and wills as they could muster to defend the house when night fell. Clem had settled Celestine in what had been the dining room, laying the larger of the two mattresses on the floor and sitting with her until she slept. When he emerged Tay's feisty presence was mellowed, and the man who came to join Jude on the step was serene.

"Is she asleep?" Jude asked him.

"I don't know if it's sleep or a coma. Where's Gentle?"

"Upstairs, plotting."

"You've argued."

"That's nothing new. Everything else changes, but that remains the same."

He opened one of the bottles of beer sitting on the step and drank with gusto. 'You know, I catch myself every now and then wondering if this is all some hallucination. You've probably got a better grasp of it than I have—you've seen the Dominions; you know it's all real—but when I went off with Monday to get the mattresses, there were people just a few streets away, walking around in the sun as though it was just another day, and I thought, There's a woman back there who's been buried alive for two hundred years, and her son whose Father's a God I never heard of—"

"So he told you that."

"Oh, yes. And thinking about it, I wanted to just go home, lock the door, and pretend it wasn't happening."

"What stopped you?"

"Monday, mostly. He just takes everything in stride. And knowing Tay's inside me. Though that feels so natural it's like he was always there."

"Maybe he was," she said. "Is there any more beer?"

"Yep."

He handed over a bottle, and she struck it on the step the way he had. The top flew; the beer foamed.

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"So what made you want to run?" she said, when she'd slaked her thirst.

"I don't know," Clem replied. "Fear of what's coming, I suppose. But that's stupid, isn't it? We're here at the beginning of something sublime, just the way Tay promised. Light coming into the world, from a place we never even dreamed existed. It's the Birth of the Unconquered Son, isn't it?"

"Oh, the sons are going to be fine," Jude said. "They usually are."

"But you're not so sure about the daughters?"

"No, I'm not," she said. "Hapexamendios killed the Goddesses throughout the Imajica, Clem, or at least tried to. Now I find He's Gentle's Father. That doesn't make me feel too comfortable about doing His work."

"I can understand that."

"Part of me thinks . . ." She let her voice trail into the silence, the thought unfinished.

"What?" he asked. "Tell me."

"Part of me thinks we're fools to trust either of them, Hapexamendios or His Reconciler. If He was such a loving God, why did He do so much harm? And don't tell me He moves in mysterious ways, because that's so much horse shit and we both know it."

"Have you talked to Gentle about this?"

"I've tried, but he's got one thing on his mind—"

"Two," Clem said. "The Reconciliation's one. Pie 'oh'pah's the other."

"Oh, yes, the glorious Pie 'oh' pah."

"Did you know he married it?"

"Yes, he told me."

"It must have been quite a creature."

"I'm a little biased, I'm afraid," she said dryly. "It tried to kill me."

"Gentle said that wasn't Pie's nature."

"No?"

"He told me he ordered it to live its life as an assassin or a whore. It's all his fault, he said. He blames himself for everything."

"Does he blame himself or does he just take responsibility?" she said. "There's a difference."

"I don't know," Clem said, unwilling to be drawn on such niceties. "He's certainly lost without Pie."

She kept her counsel here, wanting to say that she too: was lost, that she too pined, but not trusting even Clem with this admission.

"He told me Pie's spirit is still alive, like Tay's," Clem was saying. "And when this is all over—"

"He says a lot of things," Jude cut in, weary of hearing Gentle's wisdoms repeated.; "And you don't believe him?"

"What do I know?" she said, flinty now. "I don't belong in this Gospel. I'm not his lover, and I won't be his disciple."

A sound behind them, and they turned to find Gentle standing in the hallway, the brightness bouncing up from the step like footlights. There was sweat on his face, and his shirt was stuck to his chest. Clem rose with guilty speed, his heel catching his bottle. It rolled down two steps, spilling frothy beer as it went, before Jude caught it.

"It's hot up there," Gentle said.

"And it's not getting any cooler," Clem observed.

"Can I have a word?"

Jude knew he wanted to speak out of her earshot, but Clem was either too guileless to realize this, which she doubted, or unwilling to play his game. He stayed on the step, obliging Gentle to come to the door.

"When Monday gets back," he said, "I'd like you to go to the estate and bring back the stones in the Retreat. I'm going to perform the Reconciliation upstairs, where I've got my memories to help me."

"Why are you sending Clem?" Jude said, not rising or even turning. "I know the way; he doesn't. I know what the stones look like; he doesn't."

"I think you'd be better off here," Gentle replied.

Now she turned. "What for?" she said. "I'm no use to anyone. Unless you simply want to keep an eye on me."

"Not at all."

"Then let me go," she said. "I'll take Monday to help

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me. Clem and Tay can stay here. They're your angels, aren't they?"

"If that's the way you'd prefer it," he said, "I don't mind."

"I'll come back, don't worry," she said derisively, raising her beer bottle. "If it's only to toast the miracle."

3

A little while after this conversation, with the blue tide of dusk rising in the street and lifting the day to the rooftops, Gentle left off his debates with Pie and went to sit with Celestine. Her room was more meditative than the one he'd left, where the memories of Pie had become so easy to conjure it was sometimes hard to believe the mystic wasn't there in the flesh. Clem had lit candles beside the mattress upon which Celestine was sleeping, and their light showed Gentle a woman so deeply asleep that no dreams troubled her. Though she was far from emaciated, her features were stark, as though her flesh was halfway to becoming bone. He studied her for a time, wondering if his own face would one day possess such severity; then he returned to the wall at the bottom of the bed and sat on his haunches there, listening to the slow cadence of her breath.

His mind was reeling with all that he'd learned, or recollected, in the room above. Like so much of the magic he'd become acquainted with, the working of the Reconciliation was not a great ceremonial. Whereas most of the dominant religions of the Fifth wallowed in ritual in order to blind their flocks to the paucity of their understanding—the liturgies and requiems, charts and sacraments all created to amplify those tiny grains of comprehension the holy men actually possessed—such theatrics were redundant when the ministers had truth in their grasp, and with the help of memory he might yet become one such minister.

The principle of the Reconciliation was not very difficult to grasp, he'd discovered. Every two hundred years, it seemed, the In Ovo produced a kind of blossom: a five-petaled lotus which floated for a brief time in those lethal

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waters, immune to either their poison or their inhabitants. This sanctuary was called by a variety of names but most simply, and most often, the Ana. In it, the Maestros would gather, carrying there analogues of the Dominions they each represented. Once the pieces were assembled, the process had its own momentum. The analogues would fuse and, empowered by the Ana, burgeon, driving the In Ovo back and opening the way between the Reconciled Dominions and the Fifth.

"The flow of things is towards success," the mystic had said, speaking from a better time. "It's the natural instinct of every broken thing to make itself whole. And the Imajica is broken until it's Reconciled."

"Then why have there been so many failures?" Gentle had asked.

"There haven't been that many," Pie had replied. "And they were always destroyed by outside forces. Christos was brought down by politics. Pineo was destroyed by the Vatican. Always people from the outside, destroying the Maestro's best intentions. We don't have such enemies."

Ironic words, with hindsight. Gentle could not afford such complacency again, not with Sartori still alive and the chilling image of Pie's last frantic appearance at the Erasura still in his head.

It was no use dwelling on it. He put the sight away as best he could, settling his gaze on Celestine instead. It was difficult to think of her as his mother. Maybe, among the innumerable memories he'd garnered in

this house, there was some faint recollection of being a babe in these arms, of putting his toothless mouth to these breasts and being nourished there. But if it was there, it escaped him. Perhaps there were simply too many years, and lives, and women, between now and that cradling. He could find it in him to be grateful for the life she'd given him, but it was hard to feel much more than that.

After a time the vigil began to depress him. She was too like a corpse, lying there, and he too much a dutiful but loveless mourner. He got up to go, but before he quit the room he halted at her bedside and stooped to touch her

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cheek. He'd not laid his flesh to hers in twenty-three or four decades, and perhaps, after this, he wouldn't do so again. She wasn't chilly, as he'd expected her to be, but warm, and he kept his hand upon her longer than he'd intended.

Somewhere in the depths of her slumber she felt his touch and seemed to rise into a dream of him. Her austerity softened, and her pale lips said, "Child?"

He wasn't sure whether to answer, but in the moment of hesitation she spoke again, the same question. This time he replied.

"Yes, Mama?" he said.

"Will you remember what I told you?"

What now? he wondered. "I'm...not certain," he told her. "Til try."

"Shall I tell you again? I want you to remember, child."

"Yes, Mama," he said. "That would be good. Tell me again."

She smiled an infinitesimal smile and began to repeat a story she'd apparently told many times.

"There was a woman once, called Nisi Nirvana...."

She'd no sooner started, however, than the dream she was having lost its claim on her, and she began to slip back into a deeper place, her voice losing power as she went.

"Don't stop, Mama," Gentle prompted. "I want to hear. There was a woman ..."

"Yes..."

"... called Nisi Nirvana."

"Yes. And she went to a city full of iniquities, where no ghost was holy and no flesh was whole. And something there did a great hurt to her...."

Her voice was getting stronger again, but the smile, even that tiniest hint, had gone.

"What hurt was this, Mama?"

"You needn't know the hurt, child. You'll learn about it one day, and on that day you'll wish you could forget it. Just understand that it's a hurt only men can do to women."

"And who did this hurt to her?" Gentle asked.

"I told you, child, a man."

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"But *what* man?"

"His name doesn't matter. What matters is that she escaped him, and came back into her own city, and knew she must make a good thing from this bad that had been done to her. And do you know what that good thing was?"

"No, Mama."

"It was a little baby. A perfect little baby. And she loved it so much it grew big after a time, and she knew it would be leaving her, so she said, 'I have a story to tell you before you go.' And do you know what the story was? I want you to remember, child."

"Tell me."

"There was a woman called Nisi Nirvana. And she went into a city of iniquities—"

"That's the same story, Mama."

"—where no ghost was holy—"

"You haven't finished the first story. You've just begun again."

"—and no flesh was whole. And something there—"

"Stop, Mama," Gentle said. "Stop."

"—did a great hurt to her...."

Distressed by this loop, Gentle took his hand from his mother's cheek. She didn't halt her recitation, however; at least not at first. The story went on exactly as it had before: the escape from the city; the good thing made from the bad; the baby, the perfect little baby. But with the hand no longer on her cheek Celestine was sinking back into unthinking slumber, her voice steadily growing more indistinct. Gentle got up and backed away to the door, as the whispered wheel came full circle again.

"So she said: I have a story to tell you before you go."

Gentle reached behind him and opened the door, his eyes fixed on his mother as the words slurred.

"And do you know what the story was?" she said. "I want... you... to... remember... child."

He went on watching her as he slipped out into the hallway. The last sounds he heard would have been

nonsense to any ear other than this, but he'd heard this story often

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enough now to know that she was beginning again as she'd dropped into dreamlessness.

"There was a woman once ..."

On that, he closed the door. For some inexplicable reason, he was shaking, and had to stand at the threshold for several seconds before he could control the tremor. When he turned, he found Clem at the bottom of the stairs, sorting through a selection of candles.

"Is she still asleep?" he asked as Gentle approached.

"Yes, Has she talked to you at all, Clem?"

"Very little. Why?"

"I've just been listening to her tell a story in her sleep. Something about a woman called Nisi Nirvana. Do you know what that means?"

"Nisi Nirvana. Unless Heaven. Is that somebody's name?"

"Apparently. And it must mean a lot to her, for some reason. That's the name she sent Jude with to fetch me."

"And what's the story?"

"Damn strange," Gentle said.

"Maybe you liked it better when you were a kid."

"Maybe."

"If I hear her talking again, do you want me to call you down?"

"I don't think so," Gentle said. "I've got it by heart already."

He started up the stairs.

"You're going to need some candles up there," Clem said. "And matches to light 'em with."

"So I am," Gentle said, turning back.

Clem handed over half a dozen candles, thick, stubby, and white. Gentle handed one of them back.

"Five's the magic number," he said.

"I left some food at the top of the stairs," Clem said as Gentle started to climb again. "It's not exactly haute cuisine, but it's sustenance. And if you don't claim it now it'll be gone as soon as the boy gets back."

Gentle called his thanks back down the flight, picked up the bread, strawberries, and bottle of beer waiting at the

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top, then returned to the Meditation Room, closing the door behind him. Perhaps because he was still preoccupied with what he'd heard from his mother's lips, the memories of Pie were not waiting at the threshold. The room was empty, a cell of the present. It wasn't until Gentle had set the candles on the mantelpiece, and was lighting one of them, that he heard the mystif speaking softly behind him.

"Now I've distressed you," it said.

Gentle turned into the room and found the mystif at the window, where it so often loitered, with a look of deep concern on its face.

"I shouldn't have asked," Pie went on. "It's just idle curiosity. I heard Abelove asking the boy Lucius a day or two ago, and it made me wonder."

"What did Lucius say?"

"He said he remembered being suckled. That was the first thing he could recall: the teat at his mouth."

Only now did Gentle grasp the subject under debate here. Once again his memory had found some fragment of conversation between himself and the mystif pertinent to his present concerns. They'd talked of childhood memories in this very room, and the Maestro had been plunged into the same distress which he felt now; and for the same reason.

"But to remember a story," Pie was saying. "Particularly one you didn't like—"

"It wasn't that I didn't like it," the Maestro said. "At least, it didn't frighten me, the way a ghost story might have done. It was worse than that...."

"We don't have to talk about this," Pie said, and for a moment Gentle thought the conversation was going to fizzle out there. He wasn't altogether certain he'd have minded if it had. But it seemed to have been one of the unwritten rules of this house that no inquiry was ever fled from, however discomfiting.

"No, I want to explain if I can," the Maestro said. "Though what a child fears is sometimes hard to fathom."

"Unless we can listen with a child's heart," Pie said.

"That's harder still."

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"We can try, can't we? Tell me the story."

"Well, it always began the same way. My mother would say, *I want you to remember, child*, and I'd know right away what was going to follow. *There was a woman called Nisi Nirvana*, and she went into

a city full of iniquities...."

Now Gentle heard the story again, this time from his own lips, told to the mystif. The woman; the city; the crime; the child; and then, with a sickening inevitability, the story beginning again with the woman and the city and the crime.

"Rape isn't a very pretty subject for a nursery tale," Pie observed.

"She never used that word."

"But that's what the crime is, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said softly, though he was uncomfortable with the admission. This was his mother's secret, his mother's pain. But yes, of course, Nisi Nirvana was Celestine, and the city of terrors was the First Dominion. She'd told her child her own story, encoded in a grim little fable. But more bizarrely than that, she'd folded the listener into the tale, and even the telling of the tale itself, creating a circle impossible to break because all of its constituent elements were trapped inside. Was it that sense of entrapment that had so distressed him as a child? Pie had another theory, however, and was voicing it from across the years.

"No wonder you were so afraid," the mystif said, "not knowing what the crime was, but knowing it was terrible. I'm sure she meant no harm by it. But your imagination must have run riot."

Gentle didn't reply; or, rather, couldn't. For the first time in these conversations with Pie he knew more than history did, and the discontinuity fractured the glass in which he'd been seeing the past. He felt a bitter sense of loss, adding to the distress he'd carried into this room. It was as though the tale of Nisi Nirvana marked the divide between the self who'd occupied these rooms two hundred years before, ignorant of his divinity, and the man he was now, who knew that the story of Nisi Nirvana was his mother's story, and the crime she'd told him about was the act that had brought him into being. There could be no more dallying in the past

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after this. He'd learned what he needed to know about the Reconciliation, and he couldn't justify further loitering. It was time to leave the comfort of memory, and Pie with it.

He picked up the bottle of beer and struck off the cap. It probably wasn't wise to be drinking alcohol at this juncture, but he wanted to toast the past before it faded from view entirely. There must have been a time", he thought, when he and Pie had raised a glass to the millennium. Could he conjure such a moment now and join his intention with the past one last time? He raised the bottle to his lips and, as he drank, heard Pie laughing across the room. He looked in the mystif's direction, and there, fading already, he caught a glimpse of his lover, not with a glass in hand but a carafe, toasting the future. He lifted the beer bottle to touch the carafe, but the mystif was fading too fast. Before past and present could share the toast, the vision was gone. It was time to begin.

Downstairs, Monday was back, talking excitedly. Setting the bottle down on the mantelpiece, Gentle went out onto the landing to find out what all the furor was about. The boy was at the door, in the middle of describing the state of the city to Clem and Jude. He'd never seen a stranger Saturday night, he said. The streets were practically empty. The only thing that was moving was the traffic lights.

"At least we'll have an easy trip," Jude said.

"Are we going somewhere?"

She told him, and he was well pleased.

"I like it out in the country," he said. "We can do whatthe fuck we like."

"Let's just make it back alive," she said. "He's relying onus."

"No problem," Monday said cheerily. Then, to Clem:"Look after the boss-man, huh? If things get weird, we canalways call on Irish and the rest."

"Did you tell them where we are?" Clem said.

"They're not going to fetch up lookin' for a bed, don'tworry," Monday said. "But the way I reckon it, the more friends we got, the better." He turned to Jude. "I'm readywhen you are," he said, and headed back outside.

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"This shouldn't take more than two or three hours,"Jude told Clem. "Look after yourself. And him."

She glanced up the stairs as she spoke, but the candles atthe bottom threw too frail a light to reach the top, and shefailed to see Gentle there. It was only when she'd gone fromthe step, and the car was roaring away down the street, thathe made his presence known.

"Monday's come back," Clem said.

"I heard."

"Did he disturb you? I'm sorry."

"No, no. I was finished anyway."

"The night's so hot," Clem said, gazing up at the sky.

"Why don't you sleep for a while? I can stand guard."

"Where's that bloody pet of yours?"

"He's called Little Ease, Clem, and he's on the top floor,keeping watch."

"I don't trust him, Gentle."

"He'll do us no harm. Go and lie down."

"Have you finished with Pie?"

"I think I've learned what I can. Now I've got to checkon the rest of the Synod."

"How'11 you do that?"

"I'll leave my body upstairs and go traveling."

"That sounds dangerous."

"I've done it before. But my flesh and blood'll be vulner?able while I'm out of it."

"As soon as you're ready to go, wake me. I'll watch over you like a hawk."

"Have an hour's nap first."

Clem picked up one of the candles and went to look for a place to lie down, leaving Gentle to take over his post at the front door. He sat on the step with his head laid against the door frame and enjoyed what little breeze the night could supply. There were no lamps working in the street. It was the light of the moon, and the stars in array around it, that picked out the details in the house opposite and caught the pale undersides of the leaves when the wind lifted them. Lulled, he fell into a doze and missed the shooting stars.

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"Oh, how beautiful," the girl said. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, and when she laughed, which her beau had made her do a lot tonight, she sounded even younger. But she wasn't laughing now. She was standing in the darkness staring up at the meteor shower, while Sartori looked on admiringly.

He'd found her three hours earlier, wandering through the Midsummer Fair on Hampstead Heath, and had easily charmed himself into her company. The fair was doing poor business, with so few people out and about, so when the rides closed down, which they did at the first sign of dusk, he talked her into coming into the City with him. They'd buy some wine, he said, and wander; find a place to sit and talk and watch the stars. It was a long time since he'd indulged himself in a seduction—Judith had been another kind of challenge entirely—but the tricks of the trade came back readily enough, and the satisfaction of watching her resistance crumble, plus the wine he imbibed, did much to assuage the pain of recent defeats.

The girl—her name was Monica—was both lovely and compliant. She met his gaze only coyly at first, but that was all part of the game, and it contented him to play it for awhile, as a diversion from the coming tragedy. Coy as she was, she didn't reject him when he suggested they take a stroll around the fields of demolished buildings at the back of Shiverick Square, though she made some remark about wanting him to treat her carefully. So he did. They walked together in the darkness until they found a spot where the undergrowth thinned and made a kind of grove. The sky was clear overhead, and she had a fine, swooning sight of the meteor shower.

"It always makes me feel a little bit afraid," she told him in a charmless Cockney. "Looking at the stars, I mean."

"Why's that?"

"Well... we're so small, aren't we?"

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He'd asked her earlier to tell him about her life, and she'd volunteered scraps of biography, first about a boy called Trevor, who'd said he loved her but had gone off with her best friend; then about her mother's collection of china frogs, and how much she'd like to live in Spain, because everybody was so much happier there. But now, without prompting, she told him she didn't care about Spain or Trevor or the china frogs. She was happy, she said; and the sight of the stars, which usually scared her, tonight made her want to fly, to which he said that they could indeed fly, together, if she just said the word.

At this she looked away from the sky, with a resigned sigh.

"I know what you want," she said. "You're all the same. Flying. Is that your fancy word for it then?"

He said she'd misunderstood him completely. He hadn't brought her here to fumble and fuss with her. That was beneath them both.

"What then?" she said.

He answered her with his hand, too swiftly to be contradicted. The second primal act, after the one she'd thought he'd brought her here to perform. Her struggles were almost as resigned as her sigh, and she was dead on the ground in less than a minute. Overhead, the stars continued to fall in an abundance he remembered from this time two hundred years before. An unseasonal rain of heavenly bodies, to presage the business of tomorrow night.

He dismembered and disemboweled her with the greatest care and laid the pieces around the grove in time-honored fashion. There was no need to hurry. This working was better completed in the bleak moments before dawn, and they were still some hours away. When they came, and the working was performed, he had high hopes for it. Godolphin's body had been cold when he'd used it, and its owner scarcely an innocent. The creatures he'd tempted from the In Ovo with such unappetizing bait had therefore been primitive. Monica, on the other hand, was warm and had not lived long enough to be much soiled. Her death would open a deeper crack in the In Ovo than Godolphin's,

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and through it he hoped to draw a particular species of Ovi-ate uniquely suited for the work tomorrow would bring: asleek, bitter-throated kind, that would help him prove, by tomorrow night, what a child born to destruction could do.

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after all that Monday had said about the state of the city, Jude had expected to find it completely deserted, but this proved not to be the case. In the time between his returning from the South Bank and their setting out for the estate, the streets of London, which were as devoid of romancing tourists and partiers as Monday had claimed, had become the territory of a third and altogether stranger tribe: that of men and women who had simply got up out of their beds and gone wandering. Almost all of them were alone, as though whatever unease had driven them out into the night was too painful to share with their loved ones. Some were dressed for a day at the office: suits and ties, skirts and sensible shoes. Others were wearing the mini-mum for decency: many barefoot, many more bare-chested. All wandered with the same languid gait, their eyes turned up to scan the sky.

As far as Jude could see, the heavens had nothing unto?ward to show them. She caught sight of a few shooting stars, but that wasn't so unusual on a clear summer night. She could only assume that these people had in their heads the idea that revelation would come from on high and, having woken with the irrational suspicion that such revelation was imminent, had gone out to look for it.

The scene was not so different when they reached the suburbs: ordinary men and women in their nightclothes, standing at street corners or on their front lawns, watching the sky. The phenomenon petered out the farther from the center of London—from Clerkenwell, perhaps—they traveled, only to reappear when they reached the outskirts of the village of Yoke, where, just a few days before, she and Gentle had stood soaked in the post office. Passing down

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the lanes they'd trudged in the rain reminded her of the naive ambition she'd returned into the Fifth bearing: the possibility of some reunion between Gentle and herself. Now she was retracing her route with all such hopes dashed, carrying a child that belonged to his enemy. Her two-hundred-year courtship with Gentle was finally, and irre?deemably, over.

The undergrowth around the estate had swelled mon?strously, and it took more than the switch Estabrook had wielded to clear a way to the gates. Despite the fact that it was flourishing, the greenery smelled rank, as if it was decaying as quickly as it was growing, and its buds would not be blossoms but rot. Thrashing to left and right with his knife, Monday led the way to the gates and through the cor?rugated iron into the parkland beyond. Though it was an hour for moths and owls, the park was swarming with all manner of daylight life. Birds circled the air as though mis?directed by a change in the poles and blind to their nests. Gnats, bees, dragonflies, and all the mazing species of a summer's day flitted in desperate confusion through the moonlit grass. Like the sky gazers in the streets they'd passed through, Nature sensed imminence and could not rest.

Jude's own sense of direction served her well, however. Though the copses scattered ahead of them looked much the same in the blue-gray light, she fixed upon the Retreat, and they trudged towards it, slowed by the muddy ground and the thickness of the grass. Monday whistled as he went, with that same blissful indifference to melody that Clem had remarked upon a few hours before.

"Do you know what's going to happen tomorrow?" Jude asked him, almost envious of his strange serenity.

"Yeah, sort of," he said. "There's these heavens, see? And the boss is going to let us go there. It's going to be ama-zin*."

"Aren't you afraid?" she said.

"What of?"

"Everything's going to change."

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"Good," he said. "I'm fucked off with the way things are."

Then he picked up the thread of his whistle again and headed on through the grass for another hundred yards, until a sound more insistent than his din silenced him.

"Listen to that."

The activity in the air and the grass had steadily increased as they approached the copse, but with the wind blowing in the opposite direction the din of such an assembly as was gathered there had not been audible until now.

"Birds and bees," Monday remarked. "And a fuck of a lot of 'em."

As they continued their advance, the scale of the parliament ahead steadily became more apparent. Though the moonlight did not pierce the foliage very deeply, it was clear that every branch of every tree around the Retreat, to the tiniest twiglet, was occupied with birds. The smell of their massing pricked their nostrils; its din, their ears.

"We're going to get our heads right royally shat on," Monday said. "Either that or we'll get stung to death."

The insects were by now a living veil between them and the copse, so thick that they gave up attempting to flail it aside after a few strides and bore the deaths on their brows and cheeks, and the countless flutterings in their hair, in order to pick up speed and dash for their destination. There were birds in the grass now, commoners among the parliament, denied a seat on the branches. They rose in a squawking cloud before the runners, and their alarm caused consternation in the trees. A thunderous ascent began, the mass of life so vast that the violence of its motion beat the tender leaves down. By the time Jude and Monday reached the corner of the copse, they were running through a double rain: one green and falling, the other rising and feathered.

Picking up her pace, Jude overtook Monday and headed around the Retreat—the walls of which were black with insects—to the door. At the threshold, she halted. There was a small fire burning inside, built close to the edge of the mosaic.

"Some bugger got here first," Monday remarked.

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"I don't see anyone."

He pointed to a bundle lying on the floor beyond the fire. His eyes, more accustomed than hers to seeing life in rags, had found the fire maker. She stepped into the Retreat, knowing before he raised his head who this creature was. How could she not? Three times before—once here, once in Yzordderex, and once, most recently, in the Tabula Rasa's tower—this man had made an unexpected arrival, as though to prove what he'd claimed not so long ago: that their lives would be perpetually interwoven, because they were the same.

"Dowd?"

He didn't move.

"Knife," she said to Monday.

He passed it over and, armed, she advanced across the Retreat towards the bundle. Dowd's hands were crossed on his chest, as though he expected to expire where he lay. His eyes were closed, but they were the only part of his face that was. Almost every other inch had been laid open by Celestine's assault, and despite his legendary powers of recuperation he'd been unable to make good the damage done. He was unmasked to the bone. Yet he breathed, albeit weakly, and moaned to himself now and then, as though dreaming of punishment or revenge. She was half tempted to kill him in his sleep and have this bitter business brought to an end on the spot. But she was curious to know why he was here. Had he attempted to return to Yzordderex, and failed, or was he expecting someone to come back this way and meet him here? Either could be significant in these volatile times, and though in her present venomous state she felt perfectly capable of dispatching him, he'd always been an agent in the dealings of greater souls and might still have some fragment of use as a messenger. She went down on her haunches beside him and spoke his name above the din of birds coming back to roost on the roof. He opened his eyes only slowly, adding their glint to the wetness of his features.

"Look at you," he said. "You're radiant, lovey." It was a line from a boulevard comedy, and despite his wretched condition he spoke it with elan. "I, of course, look like or-

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dure. Will you come closer to me? I don't have the energy for volume."

She hesitated to comply. Though he was on the verge of extinction, he had boundless capacity for malice in him and, with the Pivot's sloughings still fixed in his flesh, the power to do harm.

"I can hear you perfectly well where I am," she said.

"I'm good for a hundred words at this volume," he bargained. "Twice that at a whisper."

"What have we got left to say to each other?"

"Ah," he said. "So much. You think you've heard everybody's stories, don't you? Mine. Sartori's. Godolphin's. Even the Reconciler's, by now. But you're missing one."

"Oh, am I?" she said, not much caring. "Whose is that?"

"Come closer."

"I'll hear it from here or not at all."

He looked at her beadily. "You're a bitch, you really are."

"And you're wasting words. If you've got something to say, say it. Whose story am I missing?"

He bided his time before replying, to squeeze what little drama he could out of this. Finally, he said, "The Father's."

"What father?"

"Is there more than one? Hapexamendios. The Aboriginal. The Unbeheld. He of the First Dominion."

"You don't know that story," she said.

He reached up with sudden speed, and his hand was clamped around her arm before she could move out of range. Monday saw the attack and came running, but she halted him before he plowed into Dowd and sent him back to sit by the fire.

"It's all right," she told him. "He's not going to hurt me. Are you?" She studied Dowd. "Well, are you?" she said again. "You can't afford to lose me. I'm the last audience you'll have, and you know it. If you don't tell this story to me, you're not going to tell it to anybody. Not this side of Hell."

The man quietly conceded her point. "True," he said.

"So tell. Unburden yourself."

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He drew a laborious breath; then he began.

"I saw Him once, you know," he said. "The Father of the Imajica. He came to me in the desert."

"He appeared in person, did He?" she said, her skepticism plain.

"Not exactly. I heard Him speaking out of the First. But I saw hints, you know, in the Erasure."

"And what did He look like?"

"Like a man, from what I could see."

"Or what you imagined."

"Maybe I did," Dowd said. "But I didn't imagine what He told me—"

"That He'd raise you up. Make you His procurer. You've told me all this before, Dowd."

"Not all of it," he said. "When I'd seen Him, I came back to the Fifth, using feits He'd whispered to me to cross the In Ovo, and I searched the length and breadth of London for a woman to be blessed among women."

"And you found Celestine?"

"Yes. I found Celestine—at Tyburn, as a matter of fact—watching a hanging. I don't know why I chose her. Perhaps because she laughed so hard when the man kissed her, and I thought, She's no sentimentalist, this woman; she won't weep and wail if she's taken into another Dominion. She wasn't beautiful, even then, but she had a clarity, you know? Some actresses have it. The great ones, anyway. A face that could carry extremes of emotion and not look bathetic. Maybe I was a little infatuated with her..." He shivered. "I was capable of that when I was younger. So...I made myself known to her, and told her I wanted to show her a living dream, the like of which she'd never forget. She resisted at first, but I could have talked the face off the moon in those days, and she let me drug her with sways and take her away. It was a hell of a journey. Four months, across the Dominions. But I got her there eventually, back to the Erasure...."

"And what happened?"

"It opened."

"And?"

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"I saw the City of God."

Here at least was something she wanted to know about. "What was it like?" she said.

"It was just a glimpse—"

Having denied him her proximity for so long, she leaned towards him and repeated her question inches from his ravaged face. "What was it like?"

"Vast and gleaming and exquisite."

"Gold?"

"All colors. But it was just a glimpse. Then the walls seemed to burst, and something reached for Celestine and took her."

"Did you see what it was?"

"I've tried to remember, over and over. Sometimes I think it was like a net; sometimes like a cloud. I don't know. Whatever it was, it took her."

"You tried to help her, of course," Jude said.

"No, I shat my pants and crawled away. What could I do? She belonged to God. And in the long run, wasn't she the lucky one?"

"Abducted and raped?"

"Abducted, raped, and made a little divine. Whereas I, who'd done all the work, what was I?"

"A pimp."

"Yes. A pimp. Anyway, she's had her revenge," he said sourly. "Look at me! She's had more than enough."

That was true. The life both Oscar and Quai-soir had failed to extinguish in Dowd, Celestine had virtually put out.

"So that's the Father's tale?" Jude said. "I've heard most of it before."

"That's the tale. But what's the moral?"

"You tell me."

He shook his head slightly. "I don't know whether you're mocking or not"

"I'm listening, aren't I? Be grateful for small mercies. You could be lying here without an audience."

"Well, that's part of it, isn't it? I'm not. You could have come here when I was dead. You could maybe not have

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come here at all. But our lives have collided one last time. That's fate's way of telling me to unburden myself."

"Of what?"

"I'll tell you." Again, a labored breath. "All these years I've wondered: Why did God pluck a scabby little actor chappie up out of the dirt and send him across three Dominions to fetch Him a woman?"

"He wanted a Reconciler."

"And He couldn't find a wife in His own city?" Dowd said. "Isn't that a little odd? Besides, why does He care whether the Imajica's Reconciled or not?"

Now that was a good question, she thought. Here was a God who'd sealed Himself away in His own city, and showed no desire to lower the wall between His Dominion and the rest, yet went to immense lengths to breed a child who would bring all such walls tumbling down.

"It's certainly strange," she said.

"I'd say so."

"Have you got any answers to any of this?"

"Not really. But I think He must have some purpose, don't you, or why go to all this trouble?"

"A plot..."

"Gods don't plot. They create. They protect. They proscribe."

"So which is He doing?"

"That's the nub of it. Maybe you can find out. Maybe the other Reconcilers already did."

"The others?"

"The sons He sent before Sartori. Maybe they realized what He was up to, and they defied Him."

There was a thought.

"Maybe Christos didn't die saving mortal man from his sins—"

"But from his Father?"

"Yes."

She thought of the scenes she'd glimpsed in the Boston Bowl—the terrible spectacle of the city, and most likely the Dominion, overwhelmed by a great darkness—and her body, that had been driven to fits and convulsions by the

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torments visited upon her, grew suddenly still. There was no panic, no frenzy: just a deep, cold dread.

"What do I do?"

"I don't know, lovey. You're free to do whatever you like, remember?"

A few hours before, sitting on the step with Clem, her lack of a place in the Gospel of Reconciliation had depressed her spirits. But now it seemed that fact offered her some frail thread of hope. As Dowd had been so eager to claim at the tower, she belonged to no one. The Godolphins were dead, and so was Quaisoir. Gentle had gone to walk in the footsteps of Christos, and Sartori was either out building his New Yzordderrex or digging a hole to die in. She was on her own, and in a world in which everyone else was blinded by obsession and obligation, that was a significant condition. Perhaps only she could see this story remotely now and make a judgment unswayed by fealty.

"This is some choice," she said.

"Perhaps you'd better forget I even spoke, lovely," Dowd said. His voice was becoming frailer by the phrase, but he preserved as best he could his jaunty tone. "It's just gossip from an actor chappie."

"If I try and stop the Reconciliation—"

"You'll be flying in the face of the Father, the Son, and probably the Holy Ghost as well."

"And if I don't?"

"You take the responsibility for whatever happens."

"Why?"

"Because"—the power in his voice was now so diminished the sound of the fire he'd built was louder—"because I think only *you* can stop it."

As he spoke, his hand lost its grip on her arm. "Well..." he said, "that's done...." His eyes began to flicker closed.

"One last thing, lovey?" he said.

"Yes?"

"It's maybe asking too much ..."

"What is?"

"I wonder ... could you ... forgive me? I know it's absurd ... but I don't want to die with you despising me."

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She thought of the cruel scene he'd played with Quaisoir, when her sister had asked for some kindness. While she hesitated, he began whispering again.

"We were ... just a little ... the same, you know?"

At this, she put out her hand to touch him and offer what comfort she could, but before her fingers reached him his breath stopped and his eyes flickered closed.

Jude let out a tiny moan. Against all reason, she felt a pang of loss at Dowd's passing.

"Is something wrong?" Monday said.

She stood up. "That rather depends on your point of view," she said, borrowing an air of comedic fatalism from the man at her feet. It was a tone worth rehearsing. She might need it quite a bit in the next few hours, "Can you spare a cigarette?" she asked Monday.

Monday fished out his pack and lobbed it over. She took one and threw the pack back as she returned to the fire, stooping to pluck up a burning twig to light the tobacco.

"What happened to fella, m'lad?"

"He's dead."

"So what do we do now?"

What indeed? If ever a road divided, it was here. Should she prevent the Reconciliation—it wouldn't be difficult; the stones were at her feet—and let history call her a destroyer for doing so? Or should she let it proceed and risk an end to all histories, and futures too?

"How long till it's light?" she asked Monday.

The watch he was wearing had been part of the booty he'd brought back to Gamut Street on his first trip. He consulted it with a flourish. "Two and a half hours," he said.

There was so little time to act, and little still to decide on a course. Returning to Clerkenwell with Monday was a cul-de-sac; that at least was certain. Gentle was the Unbeheld's agent in this, and he wasn't going to be diverted from his Father's business now, especially on the word of a man like Dowd, who'd spent his life a stranger to truth. He'd argue that this confession had been Dowd's revenge on the living: a last desperate attempt to spoil a glory he knew he couldn't share. And maybe that was true; maybe she'd been duped.

"Are we going to collect these stones or what?" Monday said.

"I think we have to," she said, still musing.

"What are they for?"

"They're . . . like stepping stones," she said, her voice losing momentum as a thought distracted her.

Indeed they were stepping stones. They were a way back to Yzordderrex, which suddenly seemed like an open road, along which she might yet find some guidance, in these last hours, to help her make a choice.

She threw her cigarette down into the embers. "You're going to have to take the stones back to Gamut Street on your own, Monday."

"Where are you going?"

"To Yzordderrex."

"Why?"

"It's too complicated to explain. You just have to swear to me that you'll do exactly as I tell you."

"I'm ready," he said.

"All right. So listen up. When I'm gone I want you to take the stones back to Gamut Street and carry a message along with them. It has to go to Gentle personally, you understand? Don't trust anybody else with it. Even Clem."

"I understand," Monday said, beaming with pleasure at this unlooked-for honor. "What have I got to tell him?"

"Where I've gone, for one thing."

"Yzordderrex."

"That's right."

"Then tell him"—she pondered for a moment—"tell him the Reconciliation isn't safe, and he mustn't start the working until I contact him again."

"It isn't safe, and he mustn't start the working—"

"—until I contact him again."

"I've got that. Is there any more?"

"That's it," she said. "Now, all I've got to do is find the circle."

She started to scan the mosaic, looking for the subtle differences in tone that marked the stones. From past experience, she knew that once they'd been lifted from their

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niches the Yzordderrexian Express would be under way, so she told Monday to wait outside until she'd gone. He looked worried now, but she told him she'd come to no harm.

"It's not that," he said, "I want to know what the message means. If you're telling the boss it's not safe, does that mean he won't open the Dominions?"

"I don't know."

"But I want to see Patashoqua and L'Himby and Yzord-derrex," he said, listing the places like charms.

"I know that," she said. "And believe me, I want the Dominions opened just as much as you do."

She studied his face in the dying firelight, looking for some clue as to whether he was being placated, but for all his youth he was a master of concealment. She'd have to trust that he'd put his duties as a messenger above his desire to see the Imajica and relay the spirit of her warning, if not its precise text.

"You've got to make Gentle understand the danger he's in," she said, hoping this tack would make him conscientious.

"I will," he said, now faintly irritated by her insistence.

She let the subject lie and returned to the business of finding the stones. He didn't offer his assistance, but retreated to the door, from which he said, "How will you get back?"

She'd found four of the stones already, and the birds on the roof had set up a fresh cacophony, suggesting that they felt some tremor of change below.

"I'll deal with that problem when I get to it," she replied.

The birds suddenly rose up and, unnerved, Monday stepped out of the Retreat altogether. Jude glanced up at him as she dug out another stone. The fire between them had already been fanned into flame, and now its ashes were stirred up, rising in a smutty cloud to hide the door from view. She scanned the mosaic, checking to see if she'd missed a stone, but the itches and aches she remembered from her first crossing were already creeping through her body, proof that the passing place was about its work.

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Oscar had told her, on this very spot, that the discomforts of passage diminished with repetition, and his words proved correct. She had time, as the walls blurred around her, to glimpse the door through the swirling ash and realize, all too late, that she should have looked out at the world one last time before leaving it. Then the Retreat disappeared, and the In Ovo's delirium was oppressing her, its prisoners rising in their legions to claim her. Traveling alone, she went more quickly than she had with Oscar (at least that was her impression), and she was out the other side before the Oviates had time to sniff the heels of her glyph.

The walls of the merchant Peccable's cellar were brighter than she remembered them. The reason: a lamp which burned on the floor a yard from the circle and beyond it a figure, its face a blur, which came at her with a bludgeon and laid her unconscious on the floor before she'd uttered a word of explanation.

18

I

The mantle of night was falling on the Fifth Dominion, and Gentle found Tick Raw near the summit of the Mount of Lipper Bayak, watching the last dusky colors of day drop from the sky. He was eating while he did so, a bowl each of sausage and pickle between his feet and a large pot of mustard between these, into which meat and vegetable alike were plunged; Though Gentle had come here as a projection—his body left sitting cross-legged in the Meditation Room in Gamut Street—he didn't need nose or palate to appreciate the piquancy of Raw's meal; imagination sufficed.

He looked up when Gentle approached, unperturbed by the phantom watching him eat.

"You're early, aren't you?" he remarked, glancing at his

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pocket watch, which hung from his coat on a piece of string. "We've got hours yet."

"I know. I just came—"

"—to check up on me," Tick Raw said, the sting of pickle in his voice. "Well, I'm here. Are you ready in the Fifth?"

"We're getting there," Gentle said, somewhat queasily.

Though he'd traveled this way countless times as the Maestro Sartori—his mind, empowered by feits, carrying his image and his voice across the Dominions—and had reacquainted himself with the technique easily enough, the sensation was damn strange.

"What do I look like?" he asked Tick Raw, remembering as he spoke how he'd attempted to describe the mystification on these very slopes.

"Insubstantial," Tick Raw replied, squinting up at him, then returning to his meal. "Which is fine by me, because there's not enough sausage for two."

"I'm still getting used to what I'm capable of."

"Well, don't take too long about it," Tick Raw said. "We've got work to do."

"And I should have realized that you were part of that work when I was first here, but I didn't, and for that I apologize."

"Accepted," Tick Raw said.

"You must have thought I was crazy."

"You certainly—how shall I put this?—you certainly confounded me. It took me days to work out why you were so damn obstreperous. Pie talked to me, you know, tried to make me understand. But I'd been waiting for somebody to come from the Fifth for so long I was only listening with half an ear."

"I think Pie probably hoped my meeting with you would make me remember who the hell I was."

"How long did it take?"

"Months."

"Was it the mystif who hid you from yourself in the first place?"

"Yes, of course."

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"Well, it did too good a job. That'll teach it. Where's your flesh and blood, by the way?"

"Back in the Fifth."

"Take my advice, don't leave it too long. I find the bow?els mutiny, and you come back to find you're sitting in shite. Of course, that could be a personal weakness."

He selected another sausage and chewed on it as he asked Gentle why the hell he'd let the mystif make him for?get.

"I was a coward," Gentle replied. "I couldn't face my failure."

"It's hard," Tick Raw said. "I've lived all these years wondering if I could have saved my Maestro, Uter Musky, if I'd been quicker witted. I still miss him."

"I'm responsible for what happened to him, and I've no excuses."

"We've all got our frailties, Maestro: my bowels; your cowardice. None of us is perfect. But I presume your being here means we're finally going to have another try?"

"That's my intention, yes."

Again, Tick Raw looked at his watch, doing a mute calculation as he chewed. "Twenty of your Fifth Dominion hours from now, or thereabouts."

"That's right."

"Well, you'll find me ready," he said, consuming a sizable pickle in one bite.

"Do you have anyone to help you?"

His mouth full, all Tick could manage was: "on't 'eedun." He chewed on, then swallowed. "Nobody even knows I'm here," he explained. "I'm still wanted by the law, even though I hear Yzordderrex is in ruins."

"It's true."

"I also hear the Pivot's quite transformed," Tick Raw said. "Is that right?"

"Into what?"

"Nobody can get near enough to find out," he replied. "But if you're planning to check on the whole Synod—"

"I am."

"Then maybe you'll see for yourself while you're in the

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city. There was a Eurhetemec representing the Second, if I remember—"

"He's dead."

"So who's there now?"

"I'm hoping Scopique's found someone."

"He's in the Third, isn't he? At the Pivot pit?"

"That's right."

"And who's at the Erasure?"

"A man called Chicka Jackeen."

"I've never heard of him," Tick Raw said. "Which is odd. I get to hear about most Maestros. Are you sure he's a Maestro?"

"Certainly."

Tick Raw shrugged. "I'll meet him in the Ana then. And don't worry about me, Sartori. I'll be here."

"I'm glad we've made our peace."

"I fight over food and women but never metaphysics," Tick Raw said. "Besides, we've joined in a great mission. This time tomorrow you'll be able to walk home from here!"

Their exchange ended on that optimistic note, and Gentle left Tick to his night watch, heading with a thought toward the Kwem, where he hoped to find Scopique keeping his place beside the site of the Pivot. He would have been there in the time it took to think himself over the border between Dominions, but he allowed his journey to be diverted by memory. His thoughts turned to Beatrix as he left the Mount of Lipper Bayak, and it was there rather than the Kwem his spirit flew to, arriving on the outskirts of the village.

It was night here too, of course. Doeki looked softly on the dark slopes around him, their neck bells

tinkling. Beatrix itself was silent, however, the lamps that had flickered in the groves around the houses gone, and the children who'd tended them gone too: all extinguished. Distressed by this melancholy sight, Gentle almost fled the village there and then, but that he glimpsed a single light in the distance and, advancing a little way, saw a figure he recognized

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crossing the street, his lamp held high. It was Coaxial Tasko, the hermit of the hill who'd granted Pie and Gentle the means to dare the Jokalaylau. Tasko paused, halfway across the street, and raised his lamp, peering out into the darkness.

"Is somebody there?" he asked.

Gentle wanted to speak—to make his peace, as he had with Tick Raw, and to talk about the promise of tomorrow—but the expression on Tasko's face forbade him. The hermit wouldn't thank him for apologies, Gentle thought, or for talk of a bright new day. Not when there were so many who'd never see it. If Tasko had some inkling of his visitor, he also judged a meeting pointless. He simply shuttled, lowered his lamp, and moved on about his business.

Gentle didn't linger another minute, but turned his face up towards the mountains and thought himself away, not just from Beatrix but from the Dominion. The village vanished, and the dusty daylight of the Kwem appeared around him. Of the four sites where he hoped to find his fellow Maestros—the Mount, the Kwem, the Eurhetemec Kesparate, and the Erasure—this was the only one he hadn't visited in his travels with Pie, and he'd been prepared to have some difficulty locating the spot. But Scopique's presence was a beacon in this wasteland. Though the wind raised blinding clouds of dust, he found the man within a few moments of his arrival, squatting in the shelter of a primitive blind, constructed from a few blankets hung on poles which were stuck in the gray earth.

Uncomfortable though it was, Scopique had suffered worse privations in his life as a seditionist—not least his incarceration in the *maison de sante*—and when he rose to meet Gentle it was with the brio of a fit and contented man. He was dressed immaculately in a three-piece suit and bowtie, and his face, despite the peculiarity of his features (the nose that was barely two holes in his head, the popping eyes), was much less pinched than it had been, his cheeks made florid by the gritty wind. Like Tick Raw, he was expecting his visitor.

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"Come in! Come in!" he said. "Not that you're feeling the wind much, eh?"

Though this was true (the wind blew through Gentle in the most curious way, eddying around his navel), he joined Scopique in the lee of his blankets, and there they sat down to talk. As ever, Scopique had a good deal to say and poured his tales and observations out in a seamless monologue. He was ready, he said, to represent this Dominion in the sacred space of the Ana, though he wondered how the equilibrium of the working would be affected by the absence of the Pivot. It had been set at the center of the Five Dominions, he reminded Gentle, to be a conduit, and perhaps an interpreter, of power through the Imajica. Now it was gone, and the Third was undoubtedly the weaker for its removal.

"Look," he said, standing up and leading his phantom visitor out to the tip of the pit. "I'm left conjuring beside a hole in the ground!"

"And you think that'll affect the working?"

"Who knows? We're all amateurs pretending to be experts. All I can do is cleanse the place of its previous occupant and hope for the best."

He directed Gentle's attention away from the pit, to the smoking shell of a sizable building, which was only occasionally visible through the dust.

"What was that?" Gentle asked.

"The bastard's palace."

"And who destroyed it?"

"I did, of course," Scopique said. "I didn't want his handiwork looming over our working. This is going to be a delicate operation as it is, without his filthy influence fucking it up. It looked like a bordello!" He turned his back on it. "We should have had months to prepare for this, no hours."

"I realize that—"

"And then there's the problem of the Second. You know Pie charged me with finding a replacement? I'd have liked to discuss all of this with you, of course, but when we last met you were in a fugue state, and Pie forbade me to ac-

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quaint you with who you were, though—may I be honest?"

"Could I stop you?"

"No. I was sorely tempted to slap you out of it." Scopique looked at Gentle fiercely, as though he might have done so now, if Gentle had been material enough. "You caused the mystif so much grief, you know," he said. "And like a damned fool it loved you anyway."

"I had my reasons," Gentle said softly. "But you were talking about this replacement—"

"Ah, yes. Athanasius."

"Athanasius?"

"He's now our man in Yzordderrex, representing the Second. Don't look so appalled. He knows the ceremony, and he's completely committed to it."

"There's not a sane bone in his body, Scopique. He thought I was Hapexamendios' agent."

"Well, of course, that's nonsense—"

"He tried to kill me with Madonnas. He's crazy!"

"We've all had our moments, Sartori."

"Don't call me that."

"Athanasius is one of the most holy men I've ever met."

"How can he believe in the Holy Mother one moment and claim he's Jesus the next?"

"He can believe in his own mother, can't he?"

"Are you seriously saying—"

"—that Athanasius is literally the resurrected Christos? No. If we have to have a Messiah among us, I vote for you." He sighed. - "Look, I realize you have difficulties with Athanasius, but I ask you, who else was I to find? There aren't that many Maestros left, Sartori."

"I told you—"

"Yes, yes, you don't like the name. Well, forgive me, but for as long as I live you'll be the Maestro Sartori, and if you want to find somebody else to sit here instead of me, who'll call you something prettier, find him."

"Were you always this bloody-minded?" Gentle replied.

"No," said Scopique. "It's taken years of practice."

Gentle shook his head in despair. "Athanasius. It's a nightmare."

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"Don't be so sure he hasn't got the spirit of Jesu in him, by the way," Scopique said. "Stranger things have been known."

"Any more of this," Gentle said, "and I'll be as crazy as he is. Athanasius! This is a disaster!"

Furious, he left Scopique at the blind and moved off through the dust, trailing imprecations as he went, the optimism with which he'd set out on his journey severely bruised. Rather than appear in front of Athanasius with his thoughts so chaotic, he found a spot on the Lenten Way to ponder. The situation was far from encouraging. Tick Raw was holding his position on the Mount as an outlaw, still in danger of arrest. Scopique was in doubt as to the efficacy of his place now that the Pivot had been removed. And now, of all people to join the Synod, Athanasius, a man without the wit to come out of the rain.

"Oh, God, Pie," Gentle murmured to himself. "I need you now."

The wind blew mournfully along the highway as he loitered, gusting towards the place of passage between the Third and Second Dominions, as if to usher him with it, on towards Yzordderrex. But he resisted its coaxing, taking time to examine the options available to him. There were, he decided, three. One, to abandon the Reconciliation right away, before the frailties he saw in the system were compounded and brought on another tragedy. Two, to find a Maestro who could replace Athanasius. Three, to trust Scopique's judgment and go into Yzordderrex to make his peace with the man. The first of these options was not to be seriously countenanced. This was his Father's business, and he had a sacred duty to perform it. The second, the finding of a replacement for Athanasius, was impractical in the time remaining.

Which left the third. It was unpalatable, but it seemed to be unavoidable. He'd have to accept Athanasius into the Synod.

The decision made, he succumbed to the message of the guests and at a thought went with them, along the straightroad, through the gap between the Dominions, and across the delta into the city-god's entrails.

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"Hoi-Polloi?"

Peccable's daughter had put down her bludgeon and was kneeling beside Jude with tears pouring from her crossed eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she kept saying. "I didn't know. I didn't know."

Jude sat up. A team of bell ringers was tuning up between her temples, but she was otherwise unharmed. "What are you doing here?" she asked Hoi-Polloi. "I thought you'd gone with your father."

"I did," she explained, fighting the tears. "But I lost him at the causeway. There were so many people trying to find away over. One minute he was beside me, and the next he'd vanished. I stayed there for hours, looking for him; then I thought he'd be bound to come back here, to the house, so I came back too —"

"But he wasn't here."

"No."

She started to sob again, and Jude put her arms around her, murmuring condolences.

"I'm sure he's still alive," Hoi-Polloi said. "He's just being sensible and staying under cover. It's not safe out there." She cast a nervous glance up towards the cellar roof. "If he doesn't come back after a few days, maybe you can take me to the Fifth, and he can follow."

"It's no safer there than it is here, believe me."

"What's happening to the world?" Hoi-Polloi wanted to know.

"It's changing," Jude said. "And we have to be ready for the changes, however strange they are."

"I just want things the way they were: Poppa, and the business, and everything in its place—"

"Tulips on the dining room table."

"Yes."

"It's not going to be that way for quite a while," Jude

said. "In fact, I'm not sure it'll ever be that way again." She got to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Hoi-Polloi said. "You can't leave."

"I'm afraid I've got to. I came here to work. If you want to come with me, you're welcome, but you'll have to be responsible for yourself."

Hoi-Polloi sniffed hard. "I understand," she said.

"Will you come?"

"I don't want to be alone," she replied. "I'll come."

Jude had been prepared for the scenes of devastation awaiting them beyond the door of Peccable's house, but not for the sense of rapture that accompanied them. Though there were sounds of lamentation rising from somewhere nearby, and that grief was doubtless being echoed in innumerable houses across the city, there was another message on the balmy noonday air.

"What are you smiling at?" Hoi-Polloi asked her.

She hadn't been aware she was doing so, until the girl pointed it out.

"I suppose because it feels like a new day," she said, aware as she spoke that it was also very possibly the last. Perhaps this brightness in the city's air was its acknowledgment of that: the final remission of a sickened soul before decline and collapse.

She voiced none of this to Hoi-Polloi, of course. The girl was already terrified enough. She walked a step behind Jude as they climbed the street, her fretful murmurs punctuated by hiccups. Her distress would have been profound still if she'd been able to sense the confusion in Jude, who had no clue, now that she was here, as to where to find the instruction she'd come in search of. The city was no longer a labyrinth of enchantments, if indeed it had ever been that. It was a virtual wasteland, its countless fires now guttering out but leaving a pall overhead. The comet's light pierced these grimy skirts in several places, however, and where its beams fell won color from the air, like fragments

of stained glass shimmering in solution above the griefs below.

Having no better place to head for, Jude directed them towards the nearest of these spots, which was no more than half a mile away. Long before they'd reached the place, a faint drizzle was carried their way by the breeze, and the sound of running water announced the phenomenon's source. The street had cracked open, and either a burstwater main or a spring was bubbling up from the tarmac. The sight had brought a number of spectators from the ruins, though very few were venturing close to the water, their fear not of the uncertain ground but of something far stranger. The water issuing from the crack was not running away down the hill but *up* it, leaping the steps that occasionally broke the slope with a salmon's zeal. The only witnesses unafraid of this mystery were the children, several of whom had wrested themselves from their parents' grip and were playing in the law-defying stream, some running in it, others sitting in the water to let it play over their legs. In the little shrieks they uttered, Jude was sure she heard a note of sexual pleasure.

"What is this?" Hoi-Polloi said, her tone more offended than astonished, as though the sight had been laid on as a personal affront to her.

"Why don't we follow it and find out?" Jude replied.

"Those children are going to drown," Hoi-Polloi observed, somewhat primly.

"In two inches of water? Don't be ridiculous."

With this, Jude set off, leaving Hoi-Polloi to follow if she so wished. She apparently did, because she once again fell into step behind Jude, her hiccups now abated, and they climbed in silence until, two hundred yards or more from where they'd first encountered the stream, a second appeared, this from another direction entirely and large enough to carry a light freight from the lower slopes. The bulk of the cargo was debris—items of clothing, a few drowned graveolents, some slices of burned bread—but among this trash were objects clearly set upon the stream to be carried wherever it was going: boat missives of carefully

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folded paper; small wreaths of woven grass, set with tiny flowers; a doll laid on a little flood in a shroud of ribbons.

Jude plucked one of the paper boats out of the water and unfolded it. The writing inside was smeared but legible.

Tishalulle, the letter read. *My name is Cimarra Sakeo. I send this prayer for my mother and for my father, and for my brother, Boem, who is dead. I have seen you in dreams, Tishalulle, and know you are good. You are in my heart. Please be also in the hearts of my mother and father, and give them your comfort.*

Jude passed the letter over to Hoi-Polloi, her gaze following the course of the married streams.

"Who's Tishalulle?" she asked.

Hoi-Polloi didn't reply. Jude glanced around at her, to find that the girl was staring up the hill.

"Tishalulli?" Jude said again.

"She's a Goddess," Hoi-Polloi replied, her voice lowered although there was nobody within earshot. She dropped the letter onto the ground as she spoke, but Jude stooped to pick it up.

"We should be careful of people's prayers," she said, refolding the boat and letting it return to its voyage.

"She'll never get it," Hoi-Polloi said. "She doesn't exist."

"Yet you refuse to say her name out loud."

"We're not supposed to name any of the Goddesses. Poppa taught us that. It's forbidden."

"There are others, then?"

"Oh, yes. There's the sisters of the Delta. And Poppa said there's even one called Jokalaylau, who lived in the mountains."

"Where does Tishalulle come from?"

"The Cradle of Chzercemit, I think. I'm not sure."

"The Cradle of what?"

"It's a lake in the Third Dominion."

This time, Jude knew she was smiling. "Rivers, snows, and lakes," she said, going down on her haunches beside the stream and putting her fingers into it. "They've come in the waters, Hoi-Polloi."

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"Who have?"

The stream was cool and played against Jude's fingers, leaping up against her palm. "Don't be obtuse," she said. "The Goddesses. They're here."

"That's impossible. Even if they still existed—and Poppa told me they don't—why would they come here?"

Jude lifted a cupped handful of water to her lips and sipped. It tasted sweet. "Perhaps somebody called them," she said. She looked at Hoi-Polloi, whose face was still registering her distaste at what Jude had just done.

"Somebody up there?" the girl said.

"Well, it takes a lot of effort to climb a hill," Jude said. "Especially for water. It's not heading up there because it likes the view. Somebody's pulling it. And if we go with it, sooner or later—"

"I don't think we should do that," Hoi-Polloi replied.

"It's not just the water that's being called," Jude said. "We are too. Can't you feel it?"

"No," the girl said bluntly. "I could turn around now and go back home."

"Is that what you want to do?"

Hoi-Polloi looked at the river running a yard from her foot. As luck would have it, the water was carrying some of its less lovely cargo past them: a flotilla of chicken heads and the partially incinerated carcass of a small dog.

"You drank that," Hoi-Polloi said.

"It tasted fine," Jude said, but looked away as the dog went by.

The sight had confirmed Hoi-Polloi in her unease. "I think I *will* go home," she said. "I'm not ready to meet Goddesses, even if they are up there. I've sinned toomuch."

"That's absurd," said Jude. "This isn't about sin and for?iveness. That kind of nonsense is for the men. This is ..."she faltered, uncertain of the vocabulary, then said, "This is *wiser* than that."

"How do you know?" Hoi-Polloi replied. "Nobody re?ally understands these things. Even Poppa. He used to tell

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me he knew how the comet was made, but he didn't. It's thesame with you and these Goddesses."

"Why are you so afraid?"

"If I wasn't I'd be dead. And don't condescend to me. Iknow you think I'm ridiculous, but if you were a bit politeryou'd hide it."

"I don't think you're ridiculous."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I just think you loved your Poppa a little too much. There's no crime in that. Believe me, I've made the samemistake myself, over and over again. You trust a man, andthe next thing . . ." She sighed, shaking her head. "Nevermind. Maybe you're right. Maybe you should go home. Who knows, perhaps he'll be waiting for you. What do Iknow?"

They turned their backs on each other without furtherword, and Jude headed on up the hill, wishing as she wentthat she'd found a more tactful way of stating her case.

She'd climbed fifty yards when she heard the soft pad ofHoi-Polloi's step behind her, then the girl's voice, its rebuk?ing tone gone, saying, "Poppa's not going to come home, ishe?"

Jude turned back, meeting Hoi-Polloi's cross-eyed gazeas best she could. "No," she said, "I don't think he is."

Hoi-Polloi looked at the cracked ground beneath herfeet. "I think I've always known that," she said, "but I justhaven't been able to admit it." Now she looked up againand, contrary to Jude's expectation, was dry-eyed. Indeed,she almost looked happy, as though she was lighter for thisadmission. "We're both alone now, aren't we?" she said.

"Yes, we are."

"So maybe we should go on together. For both oursakes."

"Thank you for thinking of me," Jude said. " "We women should stick together," Hoi-Polloi replied,and came to join Jude as she resumed the climb.

To Gentle's eye Yzordderrex looked like a fever dream of itself. A dark *borealis* hung above the palace, but the streets and squares were everywhere visited by wonders. Rivers sprang from the fractured pavements and danced up the mountainside, spitting their climb in gravity's face. A nimbus of color painted the air over each of the springing places, bright as a flock of parrots. It was a spectacle he knew Pie would have reveled in, and he made a mental note of every strangeness along the way, so that he could paint the scene in words when he was back at the mystic's side.

But it wasn't all wonders. These prisms and waters rose amid scenes of utter devastation, where keening widows sat, barely distinguishable from the blackened rubble of their houses. Only the Eurhetemec Kesparate, at the gates of which he presently stood, seemed to be untouched by the fire raisers. There was no sign of any inhabitant, however, and Gentle wandered for several minutes, silently honing a fresh set of insults for Scopique, when he caught sight of the man he'd come to find. Athanasius was standing in front of one of the trees that lined the boulevards of the Kesparate, staring up at it admiringly. Though the foliage was still in place, the arrangement of branches it grew upon was visible, and Gentle didn't have to be an aspirant Christos to see how readily a body might be nailed to them. He called Athanasius' name several times as he approached, but the man seemed lost in reverie and didn't look around, even when Gentle was at his shoulder. He did, however, reply.

"You came not a moment too soon," he said.

"Auto-crucifixion," Gentle replied. "Now that would be a miracle."

Athanasius turned to him. His face was sallow and his forehead bloody. He looked at the scabs on Gentle's brow and shook his head.

"Two of a kind," he said. Then he raised his hands. The palms bore unmistakable marks. "Have you got these too?"

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"No. And these"—Gentle pointed to his forehead—"aren't what you think. Why do you do this to yourself?"

"I didn't do it," Athanasius replied. "I woke up with these wounds. Believe me, I don't welcome them."

Gentle's face registered his skepticism, and Athanasius responded with vim.

"I've never wanted any of this," he said. "Not the stigmata. Not the dreams."

"So why were you looking at the tree?"

"I'm hungry," came the reply, "and I was wondering if I had the strength to climb."

The gaze directed Gentle's attention back to the tree. Amid the foliage on the higher branches were clusters of comet-ripened fruit, like zebra tangerines.

"I can't help you, I'm afraid," Gentle said. "I don't have enough substance to catch hold of them. Can't you shake them down?"

"I tried. Never mind. We've got more important business than my belly."

"Finding you bandages, for one," Gentle said, his suspicions chastened out of him by this misunderstanding, at least for the moment. "I don't want you Weeding to death before we begin the Reconciliation."

"You mean these?" he said, looking at his hands. "No, it stops and starts whenever it wants. I'm used to it."

"Well, then, we should at least find you something to eat. Have you tried any of the houses?"

"I'm not a thief."

"I don't think anybody's coming back, Athanasius. Let's find you some sustenance before you pass out."

They went to the nearest house, and after a little encouragement from Gentle, who was surprised to find such moralnicety in his companion, Athanasius kicked open the door. The house had either been looted or vacated in haste, but the kitchen had been left untouched and was well stocked. There Athanasius daintily prepared himself a sandwich with his wounded hands, bloodying the bread as he did so.

"I've such a hunger on me," he said. "I suppose you've been fasting, have you?"

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"No. Was I supposed to?"

"Each to their own," Athanasius replied. "Everybody walks to Heaven by a different road. I knew a man who couldn't pray unless he had his loins in a zarzi nest."

Gentle winced. "That's not religion, it's masochism."

"And masochism isn't a religion?" the other replied. "You surprise me."

Gentle was startled to find that Athanasius had a capacity for wit, and found himself warming to the man as they chatted. Perhaps they could profit from each other's company after all, though any truce would be cosmetic if the subject of the Erasure and all that had happened there wasn't broached.

"I owe you an explanation," he said.

"Oh?"

"For what happened at the tents. You lost a lot of your people, and it was because of me."

"I don't see how you could have handled it much differently," Athanasius said. "Neither of us knew the forces we were dealing with."

"I'm not sure I do now."

Athanasius made a grim face. "Pie 'oh' pah went to a good deal of trouble to come back and haunt you," he said.

"It wasn't a haunting."

"Whatever it was, it took will to do it. The mystif must have known what the consequences would be, for itself and for my people."

"It hated to cause harm."

"So what was so important that it caused so much?"

"It wanted to make certain I understood my purpose."

"That's not reason enough," Athanasius said.

"It's the only one I've got," Gentle replied, skirting the other part of Pie's message, the part about Sartori. Athanasius had no answers to such puzzles, so why vex him with them?

"I believe there's something going on we don't understand," Athanasius said, "Have you seen the waters?"

"Yes."

"Don't they perturb you? They do me. There are other

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powers at work here besides us, Gentle. Maybe we should be seeking them out, taking their advice."

"What do you mean *by powers*? Other Maestros?"

"No. I mean the Holy Mother. I think she may be here in Yzordderrex."

"But you're not certain."

"Something's moving the waters."

"If She was here, wouldn't you know it? You were one of her high priests."

"I was never that. We worshiped at the Erasure because there was a crime committed there. A woman was taken from that spot into the First."

Floccus Dado had told Gentle this story as they'd driven across the desert, but with so much else to vex and excite him, he'd forgotten the tale: his mother's of course.

"Her name was Celestine, wasn't it?"

"How do you know?"

"Because I've met her. She's still alive, back in the Fifth."

The other man narrowed his eyes, as though to sharpen his gaze and prick this if it was a lie. But after a

few moments a tiny smile appeared.

"So you've had dealings with holy women," he said. "There's hope for you yet."

"You can meet her yourself, when all this is over."

"I'd like that."

"But for now, we have to hold to our course. There can be no deviations. Do you understand? We can go looking for the Holy Mother when the Reconciliation's done, but not before."

"I feel so damn naked," Athanasius said.

"We all do. It's inevitable; But there's something more inevitable still."

"What's that?"

"The wholeness of things," Gentle said. "Things mended. Things healed. That's more certain than sin, or death, or darkness."

"Well said," Athanasius replied. "Who taught you that?"

"You should know. You married me to it."

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"Ah." He smiled. "Then may I remind you why a man marries? So that he can be made whole: by a woman."

"Not this man," Gentle said.

"Wasn't the mystic a woman to you?"

"Sometimes...."

"And when it wasn't?"

"It was neither man nor woman. It was bliss."

Athanasius looked intensely discomfited by this. "That sounds profane to me," he remarked.

Gentle had never thought of the bond between himself and the mystic in such terms before, nor did he welcome the burden of such doubts now. Pie had been his teacher, his friend, and his lover, a selfless champion of the Reconciliation from the very beginning. He could not believe that his Father would ever have sanctioned such a liaison if it were anything but holy.

"I think we should let the subject lie," he told Athanasius, "or we'll be at each other's throats again, and I for one don't want that."

"Neither do I," Athanasius replied. "We'll not discuss it any further. Tell me, where do you go from here?"

"To the Erasure."

"And who represents the Synod there?"

"Chicka Jackeen."

"Ah! So you chose him, did you?"

"You know him?"

"Not well. I know he came to the Erasure long before I did. In fact, I don't think anyone quite knew how long he'd been there. He's a strange fellow."

"If that were a disqualification, we'd both be out of a job," Gentle remarked.

"True enough."

With that, Gentle offered Athanasius his good wishes, and they parted—civilly if not fondly—Gentle turning his thoughts from Yzordderrex to the desert beyond. Instantly, the domestic interior flickered and was replaced seconds later by the vast wall of the Erasure, rising from a fog in which he dearly hoped the last member of his Synod was awaiting him.

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The streams kept converging as the women climbed, until they were walking beside a flow that would soon be too wide to leap and too furious to ford. There were no embankments to contain these waters, only the gullies and gutters of the street, but the same intentionality that drew them up the hill also limited their lateral spread. That way the river didn't dissipate its energies, but climbed like an animal whose skin was growing at a prodigious rate to accommodate the power it gained every time it assimilated another of its kind. By now its destination would not be in doubt. There was only one structure on the city's highest peak—the Autarch's palace—and unless an abyss opened up in the street and swallowed the waters before they reached the gates it would be there that the trail would deliver them.

Jude had mixed memories of the palace. Some, like the Pivot Tower and the chamber of sluiced prayers beneath it, were terrifying. Others were sweetly erotic, like the hours she'd spent dozing in Quaisoir's bed while Concupiscentiasang and the lover she'd thought too perfect to be real had covered her with kisses. He was gone, of course, but she would be returning into the labyrinth he'd built, now turned to some new purpose, not only with the scent of him upon her (you smell of coitus, Celestine had said) but with the fruit of that coupling in her womb. Her hope of sharing wisdom with Celestine had undoubtedly been blighted by that fact. Even after Tay's disparagement and Clem's conciliation, the woman had contrived to treat Jude as a pariah. And if *she*, merely brushed by divinity, had sniffed Sartori on Jude's skin, then surely Tishalulle would sniff the same and know the child was there too. If challenged, Jude had decided to tell the truth. She had reasons for doing all that she'd done, and she would not make false apologies, but come to the altars of these Goddesses with humility and self-respect in equal measure.

The gates were now in view, the river gushing towards

them, its flood a whitewater roar. Either its assault or some previous violence had thrown both gates off their hinges, and the water surged through the gap ecstatically.

"How do we get through?" Hoi-Polloi yelled above the din.

"It's not that deep," Jude said. "We'll be able to wade it if we go together. Here. Take my hand."

Without giving the girl time to argue or retreat, she took firm hold of Hoi-Polloi's wrist and stepped into the river. As she'd said, it wasn't very deep. Its spumy surface only climbed to the middle of their thighs. But there was considerable force in it, and they were obliged to proceed with extreme care. Jude couldn't see the ground she was leading them over, the water was too wild, but she could feel through her soles how the river was digging up the paving, eroding in a matter of minutes what the tread of soldiers, slaves, and penitents had not much impressed in two centuries. Nor was this erosion the only threat to their equilibrium. The river's freight of alms, petitions, and trash was very heavy now, gathered as it was from five or six places in the lower Kesparates. Slabs of wood knocked at their hamstrings and shins; swaths of cloth wrapped around their knees. But Jude remained surefooted and advanced with a steady tread until they were through the gates, glancing back over her shoulder now and then to reassure Hoi-Polloi with a look or a smile that, though there was discomfort there, there was no great hazard.

The river didn't slow once it was inside the palace walls. Instead it seemed to find fresh impetus, its spume thrown ever higher as it climbed through the courtyards. The comet's beams were falling here in greater abundance than on the Kesparates below, and their light, striking the water, threw silver filigrees up against the joyless stone. Distracted by the beauty of this, Jude momentarily lost her footing as they cleared the gates and, despite a cry of warning, fell back into the river, taking Hoi-Polloi with her. Though they were in no danger of drowning, the water had sufficient momentum to carry them along, and Hoi-Polloi, being much the lighter of the two, was swept past Jude at some speed.

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Their attempts to stand up again were defeated by the eddies and countercurrents; its enthusiasm was generating, and it was only by chance that Hoi-Polloi—thrown against a dam of detritus that was choking part of the flow—was able to use its accrued bulk to bring herself to a halt and haul herself to her knees. The water broke against her with considerable vehemence as she did so, its will to carry her off undiminished, but she defied it, and by the time Jude was carried to the place, Hoi-Polloi was getting to her feet.

"Give me your hand!" she yelled, returning the invitation Jude had first offered when they'd stepped into the flood.

Jude reached to do so, half turning in the water to stretch for Hoi-Polloi's fingers. But the river had other ideas. As their hands came within inches of clasping, the waters conspired to spin her and snatch her away, their hold on her so tight the breath was momentarily squeezed out of her. She couldn't even yell a word of reassurance but was hauled off by the flood, up through a monolithic archway and out of sight.

Violent as the waters were, pitching her around as it raced through the cloisters and colonnades, she wasn't in fear of them; quite the opposite. The exhilaration was contagious. She was part of their purpose now, even if they didn't know it, and happy to be delivered to their sum-moner, who was surely also their source. Whether that sum-moner—be she Tishalulle or Jokalaylau or any other Goddess who might be resident here today—judged her to be a petitioner or simply another piece of trash, only the end of this

ride would tell.

5

If Yzordderrex had become a place of glorious particulars—every color singing, every bubble in its waters crystal-line—the Erasure had given itself over to ambiguity. There was no breath of wind to stir the heavy mist that hung over the fallen tents and over the dead, shrouded but unburied, who lay in their folds; nor did the comet have fire enough to

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pierce a higher fog, the fabric of which left its light dusky and drab. Off to the left of where Gentle's projection stood, the ring of Madonnas that Athanasius and his disciples had sheltered in was visible through the murk. But the man he'd come here to find wasn't in residence there, nor was there any sign of him to the right, though here the fog was so thick it blotted out everything that lay beyond an eight- or ten-yard range. He nevertheless headed into it, loath to try calling Chicka Jackeen's name, even if his voice had possessed sufficient strength. There was a conspiracy of suppression upon the landscape, and he was unwilling to challenge it. Instead he advanced in silence, his body barely displacing the mist, his feet making little or no impression on the ground. He felt more like a phantom here than in any of the other meeting places. It was a landscape for such souls: hushed but haunted.

He didn't have to walk blindly for long. The mist began to thin out after a time, and through its shreds he caught sight of Chicka Jackeen. He'd dug a chair and small table from the wreckage and was sitting with his back to the great wall of the First Dominion, playing a solitary game of cards and talking furiously to himself as he did so. We're all crazies, Gentle thought, catching him like this. Tick Raw half mad on mustard; Scopique become an amateur arsonist; Athanasius marking sacramental sandwiches with his pierced hands; and finally Chicka Jackeen, chattering away to himself like a neurotic monkey. Crazies to a man. And of all of them he, Gentle, was probably the craziest: the lover of a creature that defied the definitions of gender, the maker of a man who had destroyed nations. The only sanity in his life—burning like a clear white light—was that which came from God: the simple purpose of a Reconciler.

"Jackeen?"

The man looked up from his cards, somewhat guiltily. "Oh. Maestro. You're here."

"Don't say you weren't expecting me?"

"Not so soon. Is it time for us to go to the Ana?"

"Not yet. I came to be sure you were ready."

"I am, Maestro. Truly."

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"Were you winning?"

"I was playing myself."

"That doesn't mean you can't win."

"No? No. As you say. Then yes, I was winning." He rose from the table, taking off the spectacles he'd been wearing to study his cards.

"Has anything come out of the Erasure while you've been waiting?"

"No, not come out. In fact, yours is the first voice I've heard since Athanasius left."

"He's part of the Synod now," Gentle said. "Scopique induced him to join us, to represent the Second."

"What happened to the Eurhetemec? Not murdered?"

"He died of old age."

"Will Athanasius be equal to the task?" Jackeen asked; then, thinking his question overstepped the bounds of protocol, he said, "I'm sorry. I've no right to question your judgment in this."

"You've every right," Gentle said. "We've got to have complete faith in each other."

"If you trust Athanasius, then so do I," Jackeen said simply.

"So we're ready."

"There *is* one thing I'd like to report, if I may."

"What's that?"

"I said nothing's come *out* of the Erasure, and that's true—"

"But something went in?"

"Yes. Last night, I was sleeping under the table here"—he pointed to his bed of blankets and stone—"and I woke chilled to the marrow. I wasn't sure whether I was dreaming at first, so I was slow to get up. But when I did I saw these figures coming out of the fog. Dozens of them."

"Who were they?"

"Nullianacs," Jackeen said. "Are you familiar with them?"

"Certainly."

"I counted fifty at least, just within sight of me."

"Did they threaten you?"

"I don't think they even saw me. They had their eyes on their destination—"

"The First?"

"That's right. But before they crossed over, they shed their clothes, and made some fires, and burned every last thing they wore or brought with them."

"All of them did this?"

"Every one that I saw. It was extraordinary."

"Can you show me the fires?"

"Easily," Jackeen said, and led Gentle away from the table, talking as he went. "I'd never seen a Nullianac before, but of course I've heard the stories."

"They're brutes," Gentle said. "I killed one in Vanaeph, a few months ago, and then I met one of its brothers in Yzordderrex, and it murdered a child I knew."

"They like innocence, I've heard. It's meat and drink to them. And they're all related to each other, though nobody's ever seen the female of the species. In fact, some say there isn't one."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"Well, I read a good deal," Jackeen said, glancing at Gentle. "But you know what they say: Study nothing except in the knowledge—"

"—that you already knew it."

"That's right."

Gentle looked at the man with fresh interest, hearing the old saw from his lips. Was it so commonplace a dictum that every student had it by heart, or did Chicka Jackeen know the significance of what he was saying? Gentle stopped walking, and Jackeen stopped beside him, offering a smile that verged on the mischievous. Now it was Gentle who did the studying, his text the other man's face: and, reading, saw the dictum proved.

"My God," he said. "Lucius?"

"Yes, Maestro. It's me."

"Lucius! Lucius!"

The years had taken their toll, of course, though not insufferably. While the face in front of him was no longer that of the eager acolyte he had sent from Gamut Street, it was

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not marked by more than a tenth of the two centuries in between.

"This is extraordinary," Gentle said,

"I thought maybe you knew who I was, and you were playing a game with me."

"How could I know?"

"Am I really so different?" the other said, clearly a little deflated. "It took me twenty-three years to master the feat of holding, but I thought I'd caught the last of my youth before it went entirely. A little vanity. Forgive me."

"When did you come here?"

"It seems like a lifetime, so it probably is. I wandered back and forth through the Dominions first, studying with one evocator after another, but I was never content with any of them. I had you to judge them by, you see. So I was always dissatisfied."

"I was a lousy teacher," Gentle said.

"Not at all. You taught me the fundamentals, and I've lived by them and prospered. Maybe not in the world's eyes, but in mine."

"The only lesson I gave you was on the stairs. Remember, that last night?"

"Of course I remember. The laws of study, workings, and fear. Wonderful."

"But they weren't mine, Lucius. The mystic taught them to me. I just passed them along."

"Isn't that what most teachers do?"

"I think the great ones refine wisdom, they don't simply repeat it. I refined nothing. I thought every word I uttered was perfect, because it was falling from my lips."

"So my idol has feet of clay?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You think I didn't know that? I saw what happened at the Retreat. I saw you fail, and it's because of that I've waited here."

"I don't follow."

"I knew you wouldn't accept failure. You'd wait, and you'd plan, and someday, even if it took a thousand years, you'd come back to try again."

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"One of these days I'll tell you how it really happened, and you won't be so impressed."

"However it went, you're here," Lucius said. "And I have my dream at last."

"Which is what?"

"To work with you. To join you in the Ana, Maestro to Maestro." He grinned. "God is in His Heaven today," he said. "If I'm ever happier than this, it'll kill me. Ah! There, Maestro!" He stopped and pointed to the ground a few yards from them. "That's one of the Nullianacs' fires."

The place was blasted, but there were some remains of the Nullianacs' robes among the ashes. Gentle approached.

"I don't have the wherewithal to sort through them, Lucius. Will you do it for me?"

Lucius obliged, stooping to turn over the cinders and pluck out what remained of the clothes. There were fragments of suits, robes, and coats in a variety of styles, one finely embroidered, after the fashion of Patashoqua, another barely more than sackcloth, a third with medals attached, as if its owner had been a soldier.

"They must have come from all over the Imajica," Gentle said.

"Summoned," Lucius replied.

"That seems like a reasonable assumption."

"But why?"

Gentle mused a moment. "I think the Unbeheld has taken them into His furnace, Lucius. He's burned them away."

"So He's wiping the Dominions clean?"

"Yes, He is. And the Nullianacs knew it. They threw off their clothes like penitents, because they knew that they were going to their judgment."

"You see," Lucius said, "you *are* wise."

"When I'm gone, will you burn even these last pieces?"

"Of course."

"It's His will that we cleanse this place."

"I'll start right away."

"And I'll go back to the Fifth and finish my preparations."

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"Is the Retreat still standing?"

"Yes. But that's not where I'll be. I've returned to Gamut Street."

"That was a fine house."

"It's still fine in its way. I saw you there on the stairs only a few nights ago."

"A spirit there and flesh here? What could be more perfect?"

"Being flesh and spirit in the whole of Creation," Gentle said.

"Yes, That would be finer still." "And it'll happen. It's all One, Lucius." "I hadn't forgotten that lesson."
"Good."

"But if I may ask—" "Yes?"

"Would you call me Chicka Jackeen from now on? I've lost the bloom of youth, so I may as well lose the name." "Maestro Jackeen it is." "Thank you."

"I'll see you in a few hours," Gentle said, and with that put his thoughts to his return.

This time there were no diversions or loiterings, for sentiment's sake or any other. He went at the speed of his intention back through Yzorderrex and along the Lenten Way, over the Cradle and the benighted heights of the Jokalay-lau, passing across the Mount of Upper Bayak and Pata-shoqua (within whose gates he had yet to step), finally returning into the Fifth, to the room he'd left in Gamut Street.

Day was at the window and Clem was at the door, patiently awaiting the return of his Maestro. As soon as he saw a flicker of animation in Gentle's face he began to speak, his message too urgent to be delayed a second longer than it had to be.

"Monday's back," he said.

Gentle stretched and yawned. His nape and lumbar regions ached, and his bladder was ready to burst, but at least

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he hadn't returned to discover his bowels had given out, as Tick Raw had predicted.

"Good," he said. He got to his feet and hobbled to the mantelpiece, clinging to it as he kicked some life back into his deadened legs. "Did he get all the stones?"

"Yes, he did. But I'm afraid Jude didn't come back with him."

"Where the hell is she?"

"He won't tell me. He's got a message from her, he says, but he won't trust it to anyone but you. Do you want to speak to him? He's downstairs, eating breakfast."

"Yes, send him up, will you? And if you can, find me something to eat. Anything but sausages."

Gem headed off down the stairs, leaving Gentle to cross to the window and throw it open. The last morning that the Fifth would see Unreconciled had dawned, and the temperature was already high enough to wilt the leaves on the tree outside. Hearing Monday's feet clattering up the stairs, Gentle turned to greet the messenger, who appeared with a half-eaten hamburger in one hand and a half-smoked cigarette in the other.

"You've got something to tell me?" he said.

"Yes, boss. From Jude."

"Where did she go?"

"Yzordderrex. That's part of what I'm supposed to tell you. She's gone to Yzordderrex."

"Did you see her go?"

"Not exactly. She made me stand outside while she went, so that's what I did."

"And the rest of the message?"

"She told me"—he made a great show of concentration now—"to tell you where she'd gone, and I've done that; then she said to tell you that the Reconciliation isn't safe, and that you weren't to do nothing until she contacted you again."

"Isn't safe? Those were her words?"

"That's what she said. No kidding."

"Do you know what she was talking about?"

"Search me, boss." His eyes had gone from Gentle to the

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darkest corner of the room. "I didn't know you had a monkey," he said. "Did you bring it back with you?"

Gentle looked to the corner. Little Ease was there, staring up at the Maestro fretfully, having presumably crept down into the Meditation Room sometime during the night.

"Does it eat hamburgers?" Monday said, going down on his haunches.

"You can try," Gentle said distractedly. "Monday, is that all Jude said: It isn't safe?" "That's it, boss. I swear."

"She just arrived at the Retreat and told you she wasn't coming back?"

"Oh, no, she took her time," Monday said, pulling a face as the creature he'd taken to be an ape skulked from its corner and started towards the proffered hamburger.

He made to stand up, but it bared its teeth in a grin of such ferocity he thought better of doing so and simply extended his arm as far as he could to keep the beast from his face. Little Ease slowed as it came within sniffing distance and, instead of snatching the meal, claimed it from Monday's hand with the greatest delicacy, pinkies raised. "Will you finish the story?" Gentle said. "Oh, yeah. Well, there was this fella in the Retreat when we got there, and she had a long jaw with him." "This was somebody she knew?" "Oh, yeah." "Who?"

"I forget his name," Monday said, but seeing Gentle's brow frown protested, "That wasn't part of the message, boss. If it had been I'd have remembered."

"Remember anyway," Gentle said, beginning to suspect conspiracy. "Who was he?"

Monday stood up and drew nervously on his cigarette. "I don't recall. There were all these birds, you know, and bees and stuff. I wasn't really listening. It was something short, like Cody or Coward or—" "Dowd,"

"Yeah! That's it. It was Dowd. And he was really fucked up, let me tell you."

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"But alive."

"Oh, yeah, for a while. Like I said, they talked together."

"And it was after this that she said she was going to Yzordderex?"

"That's right. She told me to bring the stones back to you, and the message with 'em."

"Both of which you've done. Thank you."

"You're the boss, boss," Monday said. "Is that all? If you want me I'm on the step. It's going to be a scorcher."

He thundered off downstairs.

"Shall I leave the door open, Liberator?" Little Ease said, as it nibbled on the hamburger.

"What are you doing here?"

"I got lonely up there," the creature said.

"You promised obedience," Gentle reminded it.

"You don't trust her, do you?" Little Ease replied. "You think she's gone off to join Sartori."

He hadn't until now. But the notion, now that it was floated, didn't seem so improbable. Jude had confessed what she felt for Sartori, in this very house, and clearly believed that he loved her in return. Perhaps she'd simply slipped away from the Retreat while Monday's back was turned and had gone to find the father of her child. If that was the case, it was paradoxical behavior, to seek out the arms of a man whose enemy she'd just helped towards victory. But this was not a day to waste analyzing such conundrums. She'd done what she'd done, and there was an end to it.

Gentle hoisted himself up onto the sill, from which perch he'd often planned his itinerary, and attempted to push all thoughts of her defection out of his head. This was a bad room in which to try and forget her, however. It was, after all, the womb in which she'd been made. The boards most likely still concealed motes of the sand that had marked her circle and stains, deep in their grain, of the liquors he'd anointed her

nakedness with. Try as he might to keep the thoughts from coming, one led inevitably to another. Imagining her naked, he pictured his hands upon her, slick with oils. Then his kisses. Then his body. And before a minute

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had passed he was sitting on the sill with an erection nuzzling against his underwear.

Of all the mornings to be plagued with such distraction! The beguilements of the flesh had no place in the work ahead of him. They'd brought the last Reconciliation to tragedy, and he would not allow them to lead him from his sanctified path by a single step. He looked down at his groin, disgusted with himself.

"Cut it off," Little Ease advised.

If he could have done the deed without making an invalid of himself, he'd have done so there and then, and gladly. He had nothing but contempt for what rose between his legs. It was a hotheaded idiot, and he wanted rid of it.

"I can control it," he replied.

"Famous last words," the creature said.

A blackbird had come into the tree and was singing blithely there. He looked its way and beyond, up through the branches into the burnished blue sky. His thoughts abstracted as he studied it, and by the time he heard Clem coming up the stairs with food and drink the spasm of carnality had passed, and he greeted his angels with a cooling brow.

"So now we wait," he told Clem.

"What for?"

"For Jude to come back."

"And if she doesn't?"

"She will," Gentle replied. "This is where she was born. It's her home, even if she wishes it weren't. She'll have to make her way back here eventually. And if she's conspired against us, Clem—if she's working with the enemy—then I swear I'll draw a circle right *here*"—he pointed to the boards—"and till I unmake her so well it'll be as though she never drew breath."

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I

The law-defying waters were compassionate. Though they carried Jude through the palace at considerable speed, roaming through corridors their passage had already stripped of tapestries and furnishings, they treated their cargo with care. She wasn't thrown against the walls or the pillars, but was borne up on a ship of surf that neither faltered nor foundered but hurried, remotely helmed, to its destination. That place could scarcely be in doubt. The mystery at the heart of the Autarch's maze had always been the Pivot Tower, and though she'd witnessed the beginning of the tower's undoing, it was still, surely, her place of debarkation. Prayers and petitions had gone there for an age, attracted by the

Pivot's authority. Whatever force had replaced it, calling these waters, it had set its throne on the rubble of the fallen lord.

And now she had proof of that, as the waters carried her out of the naked corridors and into the still severer environs of the tower, slowing to deliver her into a pool so thick with detritus it was almost solid. Out of this wreckage rose a staircase, and she hauled herself from the debris and lay on the lower steps, giddy but exhilarated. The waters continued to surge around the staircase like an eager spring tide, and their clear desire to be up the flight was contagious. She got to her feet, after a little time, and proceeded to climb.

Although there were no lights burning at the top, there was plenty of illumination spilling down the stairs to meet her, and like the light at the springing places it was prismatic, suggesting there were more waters ahead that had come into the palace via other routes. Before she was even halfway up the flight, two women appeared and stared down at her. Both were dressed in simple off-white shifts, the fatter of the pair, a woman of gargantuan proportions,

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unbuttoned to bare her breasts to the baby she was nursing. She looked almost as infantile as her charge, her hair wispy, her face, like her breasts, heavy and sugar-almond pink. The woman beside her was older and slimmer, her skin substantially darker than that of her companion, her gray hair braided and combed out to her shoulders like a cowl. She wore gloves, and glasses, and regarded Jude with almost professorial detachment.

"Another soul saved from the flood," she said.

Jude had stopped climbing. Though neither woman had made any sign that she was forbidden entry, she wanted to come into this miraculous place as a guest, not a trespasser.

"Am I welcome?"

"Of course," said the mother. "Have you come to meet the Goddesses?"

"Yes."

"Are you from the Bastion, then?"

Before Jude could reply, her companion supplied the answer. "Of course not! Look at her!"

"But the waters brought her."

"The waters'll bring any woman who dares. They brought us, didn't they?"

"Are there many others?" Jude asked.

"Hundreds," came the reply. "Maybe thousands by now."

Jude wasn't surprised. If someone like herself, a stranger in the Dominions, had come to suspect that the Goddesses were still extant, how much more hopeful must the women who lived here have been, living with the legends of Ti-shalulle and Jokalaylau.

When Jude reached the top of the stairs, the bespectacled woman introduced herself.

"I'm Lotti Yap."

"I'm Judith."

"We're pleased to see you, Judith," the other woman said. "I'm Paramarola. And this fellow"—she looked down at the baby—"is Billo."

"Yours?" Jude asked.

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"Now where would I have found a man to give me the likes of this?" Paramarola said.

"We've been in the Annex for nine years," Lotti Yap explained. "Guests of the Autarch."

"May his thorn rot and his berries wither," Paramarola added.

"And where have you come from?" Lotti asked.

"The Fifth," Jude said.

She was not fully attending to the women now, however. Her interest had been claimed by a window that lay across the puddle-strewn corridor behind them: or, rather, by the vista visible through it. She went to the sill, both awed and astonished, and gazed out at an extraordinary spectacle. The flood had cleared a circle half a mile wide or more in the center of the palace, sweeping walls and pillars and roofs away and drowning the rubble. All that was left, rising from the waters, were islands of rock where the taller towers had stood, and here and there a corner of one of the palace's vast amphitheaters, preserved as if to mock the overweening pretensions of its architect. Even these fragments would not stand for much longer, she suspected. The waters circled this immense basin without violence, but their sheer weight would soon bring these last remnants of Sartori's masterwork down.

At the center of this small sea was an island larger than the rest, its lower shores made up of the half-demolished chambers that had clustered around the Pivot Tower, its rocks the rubble of that tower's upper half, mingled with vast pieces of its tenant, and its height the remains of the tower itself, a ragged but glittering pyramid of rubble in which a white fire seemed to be burning. Looking at the transformation these waters had wrought, eroding in a matter of days, perhaps hours, what the Autarch had taken decades to devise and build, Jude wondered that she'd reached this place intact. The power she'd first encountered on the lower slopes as an innocent, if willful, brook was here revealed as an awesome force for change.

"Were you here when this happened?" she asked Lotti Yap.

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"We saw only the end of it," she replied. "But it was quite a sight, let me tell you. Seeing the towers fall —"

"We were afraid for our lives," Paramarola said.

"Speak for yourself," Lotti replied. "The waters didn't set us free just to drown us. We were prisoners in the Annex, you see. Then the floor cracked open, and the waters just bubbled up and washed the walls away."

"We knew the Goddesses would come, didn't we?" Paramarola said. "We always had faith in that."

"So you never believed they were dead?"

"Of course not. Buried alive, maybe. Sleeping. Even lunatic. But never dead."

"What she says is right," Lotti observed. "We knew this day would come."

"Unfortunately, it may be a short victory," Jude said.

"Why do you say that?" Lotti replied. "The Autarch's gone."

"Yes, but his Father hasn't."

"His Father?" said Paramarola. "I thought he was a bastard."

"Who's his father then?" said Lotti.

"Hapexamendios."

Paramarola laughed at this, but Lotti Yap nudged in her well-padded ribs.

"It's not a joke, Rola."

"It has to be," the other protested.

"Do you see the woman laughing?" Then, to Jude: "Do you have any evidence for this?"

"No, I don't."

"Then where'd you get such an idea?"

Jude had guessed it would be difficult to persuade people of Sartori's origins, but she'd optimistically supposed that when the moment came she'd be possessed by a sudden lucidity. Instead she felt a rage of frustration. If she was obliged to unravel the whole sorry history of her involvement with the Autarch Sartori to every soul who stood between her and the Goddesses, the worst would be upon them all before she was halfway there. Then, inspiration.

"The Pivot's the proof," she said.

"How so?" said Lotti, who was now studying this woman the flood had brought to their feet with fresh intensity.

"He could never have moved the Pivot without his Father's collaboration."

"But the Pivot doesn't belong to the Unbeheld," Paramorola said. "It never did."

Jude looked confounded.

"What Rola says is true," Lotti told her. "He may have used it to control a few weak men. But the Pivot was never His."

"Whose then?"

"Uma Umagammagi was in it."

"And who's that?"

"The sister of Tishalulle" and Jokalaylau. Half-sister of the daughters of the Delta."

"There was a *Goddess* in the Pivot?"

"Yes."

"And the Autarch didn't know it?"

"That's right. She hid Herself there to escape Hapexa's mendios when He passed through the Imajica. Jokalaylau went into the snow and was lost there. Tishalulle—"

"—in the Cradle of Chzercemit," Jude said.

"Yes indeed," said Lotti, plainly impressed.

"And Uma Umagammagi hid Herself in solid rock," Paramarola went on, telling the tale as though to a child, "thinking He'd pass over the place not seeing Her. But He chose the Pivot as the center of the Imajica and laid His power upon it, sealing Her in."

This was surely the ultimate irony, Jude thought. The architect of Yzordderrex had built his fortress, indeed his entire empire, around an imprisoned Goddess. Nor was the parallel with Celestine lost on her. It seemed Roxborough had been unwittingly working in a grim tradition when he'd sealed Celestine up beneath his house.

"Where are the Goddesses now?" Jude asked Lotti.

"On the island. We'll all be allowed into their presence in time, and we'll be blessed by them. But it'll take days."

"I don't have days," Jude said. "How do I get to the island?"

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"You'll be called when your time comes."

"That has to be now," Jude said, "or it'll be never." She looked left and right along the passageway.

"Thank you for the education," she said. "Maybe I'll see you again."

Choosing right over left she made to leave, but Lotti took hold of her sleeve.

"You don't understand, Judith," she said. "The Goddesses have come to make us safe. Nothing can harm us here. Not even the Unbeheld."

"I hope that's true," Jude said. "To the bottom of my heart, I hope that's true. But I have to warn them, in case it isn't."

"Then we'd better come with you," Lotti said, "You'll never find your way otherwise."

"Wait," Paramarola said. "Should we be doing this? She may be dangerous."

"Aren't we all?" Lotti replied. "That's why they locked us away in the first place, remember?"

2

If the atmosphere of the streets outside the palace had suggested some post-apocalyptic carnival—the waters dancing, the children laughing, the air pavonine—then that sense was a hundred times stronger in the passageways around the rim of the flood-scoured basin. There were children here too, their laughter more musical than ever. None was over five or so, but there were both boys and girls in the throng. They turned the corridors into playgrounds, their din echoing off walls that had not heard such joy since they'd been raised. There was also water, of course. Every inch of ground was blessed by a puddle, a rivulet, or a stream, every arch had a liquid curtain cascading from its keystone, every chamber was refreshed by burbling springs and roof-grazing fountains. And in every tinkling trickle there was the same sentience that Jude had felt in the tide that had brought her up here: water as life, filled to the last drop with the purpose of the Goddesses. Overhead, the comet was at its height and sent its straight white beams

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through any chink it could find, turning the humblest puddle into an oracular pool and plaiting its light into the gush of every spout.

The women in these glittering corridors came in all shapes and sizes. Many, Lotti explained, were like themselves, former prisoners of the Bastion or its dreaded Annex; others had simply found their way up the hill following their instincts and the streams, leaving their husbands, dead or alive, below.

"Are there no men here at all?"

"Only the little ones," said Lotti.

"They're all little ones," Paramarola observed.

"There was a captain at the Annex who was a brute," Lotti said, "and when the waters came he must have been emptying his bladder, because his body floated by our cell with his trousers unbuttoned."

"And you know, he was still holding on to his manhood," Paramarola said. "He had the choice between that and swimming—"

"—and instead of letting go, he drowned," Lotti said.

This entertained Paramarola no end, and she laughed so hard the baby's mouth was dislodged from her teat. Milk spurted in the child's face, which brought a further round of merriment. Jude didn't ask how Paramarola came to be so nourishing when she was neither the mother of the child nor, presumably, pregnant. It was just one of the many enigmas this journey showed her: like the pool that clung to one of the walls, filled to brimming with luminous fish; or the waters that imitated fire, from which some of the women had made crowns; or the immensely long eel she saw carried past, its gaping head on a child's shoulder, its body looped between half a dozen women, back and forth across their shoulders ten times or more. If she'd requested an explanation for any one of these sights she'd have been obliged to inquire about them all, and they'd never have got more than a few yards down the corridor.

The journey brought them, at last, to a place where the waters had carved out a shallow pool at the edge of the main basin, served by several rivulets that climbed through rub-

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ble to fill it to brimming, its overflow running into the basin itself. In it and around it were perhaps thirty women and children, some playing, some talking, but most, their clothes shed, waiting silently in the pool, gazing out across the turbulent waters of the basin to Uma Umagammagi's island. Even as Jude and her guides approached the place, a wave broke against the lip of the pool and two women, standing there hand in hand, went with it as it withdrew and were carried away towards the island. There was an eroticism about the scene which in other circumstances Jude would certainly have denied she felt. But here, such priggishness seemed redundant, even ludicrous. She allowed her imagination to wonder what it would be like to sink into the midst of this nakedness, where the only scrap of masculinity was between the legs of a suckling infant; to brush breast to breast, and let her fingers be kissed and her neck be caressed, and kiss and caress in her turn.

"The water in the basin's very deep," Lotti said at her side. "It goes all the way down into the mountain."

What had happened to the dead, Jude wondered, whose company Dowd had found so educative? Had the waters sluiced them away, along with the invocations and entreaties that had dropped into that same darkness from beneath the Pivot Tower? Or had they been dissolved into a single soup, the sex of dead men forgiven, the pain of dead women healed, and—all mingled with the prayers—become part of this indefatigable flood? She hoped so. If the powers here were to have authority against the Unbeheld, they would have to reclaim every forsaken strength they could. The walls between Kesparates had already been dragged down, and the plashing streams were making a continuum of city and palace. But the past had to be reclaimed as well, and whatever miracles it had boasted—surely there'd been some, even here—preserved. This was more than an abstract desire on Jude's part. She was, after all, one of those miracles, made in the image of the woman who'd ruled here with as much ferocity as her husband.

"Is this the only way of getting to the island?" she asked Lotti.

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"There aren't ferries, if that's what you mean."

"I'd better start swimming, then," Jude said.

Her clothes were an encumbrance, but she wasn't yet so easy with herself that she could strip off on the

rocks and went into the waters naked, so with a brief thanks to Lotti and Paramarola she started to climb down the tumble of blocks that surrounded the pool.

"I hope you're wrong, Judith," Lotti called after her.

"So do I," Jude replied. "Believe me, so do I."

Both this exchange and her ungainly descent drew the puzzled gaze of several of the bathers, but none made any objection to her appearing in their midst. The closer she got to the waters of the basin, the more anxious she became about the crossing, however. It was several years since she'd swum any distance, and she doubted she'd have the strength to resist the currents and eddies if they chose to keep her from her destination. But they wouldn't drown her, surely. They'd borne her all the way up here, after all, sweeping her through the palace unharmed. The only difference between this journey and that (though it was a profound one, to be sure) was the depth of the water.

Another wave was approaching the lip of the pool, and there was a woman and child floating forward to take it. Before they could do so, she took a running jump off the boulder she was perched on, clearing the heads of the bathers below by a hair's breadth and plunging into the tide. It wasn't so much a dive as a plummet, and it took her deep. She flailed wildly to right herself, opening her eyes but unable to decide which way was up. The waters knew. They lifted her out of their depths like a cork and threw her up into the spume. She was already twenty yards or more from the rocks and being carried away at speed. She had time to glimpse Lotti searching for her in the surf, then the eddies turned her around, and around again, until she no longer knew the direction in which the pool lay. Instead, she fixed her eyes on the island and began to swim as best she could towards it. The waters seemed content to supplement her efforts with energies of their own, though they were describing a spiral around the island, and as they carried her

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closer to its shore they also swept her in a counterclockwise motion around it.

The comet's light fell on the waves all around her, and its glitter kept the depths from sight, which she was glad of. Buoyed up though she was, she didn't want to be reminded of the pit beneath her. She put all her will into the business of swimming, not even allowing herself to enjoy the roiling of the waters against her body. Such luxury, like the questions she'd wanted to ask as she'd walked with Lotti and Paramarola, was for another day.

The shore was within fifty yards of her now, but her strokes became increasingly irrelevant the closer to the island she came. As the spiral tightened, the tide became more authoritative, and she finally gave up any attempt at self-propulsion and surrendered herself utterly to the hold of the waters. They carried her around the island twice before she felt her feet scraping the steeply inclined rocks beneath the surge, presenting her with a fine, if giddy, view of Uma Umagammagi's temple. Not surprisingly, the waters had been more inspired here than in any other spot she'd seen. They'd worked at the blocks of which the tower was built, monumental though they were, eroding the mortar between them, then eating at them top and bottom, replacing their severity with a mathematics of undulation. Slabs of stone the height of the masons who'd first carved them were no longer locked together but balanced like acrobats, one corner laid against another, while radiant water ran through the cavities and carried on its work of turning the once-impregnable tower into a wedged column of water, stone, and light. The eroded motes had run off in the rivulets and been deposited on the shore as a fine, soft sand, in which Jude lay when she emerged from the basin, given a giggling welcome by a quartet of children playing nearby.

She allowed herself only a minute to catch her breath; then she got to her feet and started up the beach towards the temple. Its doorway was as elaborately eroded as the blocks, a veil of bright water concealing the interior from those waiting nearby. There were perhaps a dozen women

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at the threshold. One, a girl barely past pubescence, was walking on her hands; somebody else seemed to be singing, but the music was so close to the sound of running water that Jude couldn't decide whether a voice was flowing or some stream was aspiring to melody. As at the pool, nobody objected to her sudden appearance, nor remarked on the fact that she was weighed down by waterlogged clothes while they were in various states of undress. A benign languor was on them all, and had it not been for Jude's will? power she might have let it claim her too. She didn't hesitate, however, but stepped through the water door without so much as a murmur to those waiting at the threshold.

Inside, there was no solid sight to greet her. Instead, the air was filled with forms of light, folding and unfolding as though invisible hands were performing a lucid origami. They weren't working towards petty resemblance, but transforming their radiant stuff over and over, each new shape on its way to becoming another before it was fixed. She looked down at her arms. They were still visible, but not as flesh and blood. They'd learned the trick of the light already and were blossoming into a multiplicity of forms in order to join the play. She reached out to touch one of her fellow visitors with her burgeoning fingers and, brushing her, caught a glimpse of the woman from whom this origami had emerged. She appeared the way a body might if a damp sheet billowed against it, momentarily clinging to the shape of her hip, her cheek, her breast, then billowing again and snatching the glimpse away. But there'd been a smile there, she was certain of that.

Reassured that she was neither alone nor unwelcome here, she began to advance into the temple. The promise of eroticism she'd first felt as she gazed into the pool was now realized. She felt the forms of her own body spreading like milk dropped into the fluid air and grazing the bodies of those she was passing between. Musings, most no more than half formed, mingled with the sensation. Perhaps she would dissolve here and flow out through the walls to join the waters around the islands; or perhaps she was already in that sea, and the flesh and blood she thought she'd owned was

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just a figment of those waters, conjured to comfort the lonely land. Or perhaps... or perhaps... or perhaps. These speculations were not divorced from the brushing of form against form but were part of the pleasure, her nerves bearing these fruits, which in turn made her more tender to the touches of her companions.

They were falling away as she advanced, she realized. Her progress was taking her up into the heights of the temple. If there had been solid ground beneath her feet, she'd lost all sense of it as she crossed the threshold and rose without effort, her stuff possessed of the same law-defying genius as had been the waters below. There was another motion ahead and above her, more sinuous than the forms she'd met at the door, and she rose towards it as if summoned, praying that when the moment came she'd have the words and lips to shape the thoughts in her head. The motion was getting clearer and if she'd had any doubt below as to whether these sights were imagined or seen, she now had such dichotomies swept away.

She was both seeing with her imagination and imagining she saw the glyph that hung in the air in front of her: a Mobius strip of light-haunted water, a steady rhythm passing through its seamless loop and

throwing off waves of brilliant color, which shed bright rains around her. Here was the raiser of springs; here was the summoner of rivers; here was the sublime presence whose strength had brought the palace to rubble and made a home for oceans and children where there'd only been terror before. Here was Uma Umagammagi.

Though she studied the Goddess's glyph, Jude could see no hint of anything that breathed, sweated, or corrupted it. But there was such an emanation of tenderness from the form that, faceless as the Goddess was, it seemed to Jude she could feel Her smile, Her kiss, Her loving gaze. And love it was. Though this power knew her not at all, Jude felt embraced and comforted as only love could embrace and comfort. There'd never been a time in her life, until now, when some part of her had not been afraid. It was the condition of being alive that even bliss was attended by the immi-

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nence of its deace. But here such terrors seemed absurd. This face loved her unconditionally and would do so forever.

"Sweet Judith," she heard the Goddess say, the voice so charged, so resonant, that these few syllables were an aria. "Sweet Judith, what's so urgent that you risk your life to come here?"

As Uma Umagammagi spoke, Jude saw her own face appearing in the ripples, brightening, then teased out into a thread of light that was run into the Goddess's glyph. She's reading me, Jude thought. She's trying to understand why I'm here, and when She does She'll take the responsibility away. I'll be able to stay in this glorious place with Her, always.

"So," said the Goddess after a time. "This is a grim business. It falls to you to choose between stopping this Recon?ciliation or letting it go on and risking some harm from Hapexamendios-"

"Yes," Jude replied, grateful that she'd been relieved of the need to explain herself. "I don't know what the Un-beheld is planning. Maybe nothing ..."

"... and maybe the end of the Imajica."

"Could He do that?"

"Very possibly," said Uma Umagammagi. "He's done harm to Our temples and Our sisters many, many times, both in His own person and through His agents. He's a soul in error, and lethal."

"But would He destroy a whole Dominion?"

"I can no more predict Him than you can," Umagam?magi said. "But I'll mourn if the chance to complete the circle is missed."

"The circle?" said Jude. "What circle?"

"The circle of the Imajica," the Goddess replied. "Please understand, sister, the Dominions were never meant to be divided this way. That was the work of the first human spir?its, when they came into their terrestrial life. Nor was there any harm in it, at the beginning. It was their way of learning to live in a condition that intimidated them. When they looked up, they saw stars. When they looked down, they

saw Earth. They couldn't make their mark on what was above, but what was below could be divided and owned and fought over. From that division, all others sprang. They lost themselves to territories and nations, all shaped by the other sex, of course; all named by them. They even buried themselves in the Earth to have it more utterly, preferring worms to the company of light. They were blinded to the Imajica, and the circle was broken, and Hapexamendios, who was made by the will of these men, grew strong enough to forsake His makers and so passed from the Fifth Dominion into the First—"

"—murdering Goddesses as He went."

"He did harm, yes, but He could have done greater harm still if He'd known the shape of the Imajica. He could have discovered what mystery it circled and gone there instead."

"What mystery's that?"

"You're going back into a dangerous place, sweet Judith, and the less you know the safer you'll be. When the time comes, we will unravel these mysteries together, as sisters. Until then take comfort that the error of the Son is also the error of the Father, and in time all errors must undo themselves and pass away."

"So if they'll solve themselves," Jude said, "why do I have to go back to the Fifth?"

Before Uma Umagammagi could resume speaking, another voice intruded. Particles rose between Jude and the Goddess as this other woman spoke, pricking Jude's flesh where they touched, reminding her of a state that knew ice and fire.

"Why do you trust this woman?" the stranger said.

"Because she came to us openhearted, Jokalaylau," the Goddess replied.

"How openhearted is a woman who treads dry-eyed in the place where her sister died?" Jokalaylau said. "How openhearted is a woman who comes into Our presence without shame, when she has the Autarch Sartori's child in her womb?"

"We have no place for shame here," Umagammagi said.

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"You may have no place," Jokalaylau said, rising into view now. "I have plenty."

Like her sister, Jokalaylau was here in Her essential form: a more complex shape than that of Uma Umagammagi, and less pleasing to the eye, because the motions that ran in it were more hectic, Her form not so much rippling as boiling, shedding its pricking darts as it did so.

"Shame is wholly appropriate for a woman who has lain with one of Our enemies," she said.

Despite the intimidation Jude felt from the Goddess, she spoke out in her own defense.

"It's not as simple as that," she said, her courage fueled by the frustration she felt, having this intruder spoil

the congress between herself and Uma Umagammagi. "I didn't know he was the Autarch."

"Who did you imagine he was? Or didn't you care?"

The exchange might have escalated, but that Uma Umagammagi spoke again, her tone as serene as ever.

"Sweet Judith," she said, "let me speak with my sister. She's suffered at the hands of the Unbeheld more than either Tishalulle" or myself, and She'll not readily forgive any flesh touched by Him or His children. Please understand Her pain, as I hope to make Her understand yours."

She spoke with such delicacy that Jude now felt the shame Jokalaylau had accused her of lacking: not for the child, but for her rage.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was ... inappropriate."

"If you'll wait on the shore," said Uma Umagammagi, "we'll speak together again in a little while."

From the moment that the Goddess had talked of Jude's returning to the Fifth, she'd known this parting would come. But she hadn't prepared herself to leave the Goddess's embrace so soon, and now that she felt gravity claiming her again, it was an agony. There was no help for it, however. If Uma Umagammagi knew what she suffered—and how could She not?—She did nothing to ameliorate the hurt, but folded Her glyph back into the matrix, leaving Jude to fall like a petal from a blossom tree, lightly enough, but with a sense of separation worse than any bruising. The

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forms of the women she'd passed through were still unfolding and folding below, as exquisite as ever, and the water music at the door was as soothing, but they could not save the loss. The melody that had sounded so joyous when she'd entered was now elegaic, like a hymn for harvest home, thankful for the gifts bestowed but touched by fears for a colder season to come.

It was waiting on the other side of the curtain, that sea-son. Though the children still laughed on the shore, and the basin was still a glorious spectacle of light and motion, she had gone from the presence of a loving spirit and couldn't help but mourn. Her tears astonished the women at the threshold, and several rose to console her, but she shook her head as they approached, and they quietly parted to let her go her way alone, down to the water. There she sat, not daring to glance back at the temple where her fate was being decided, but gazing out over the basin.

What now? she wondered. If she was called back into the presence of the Goddesses to be told she wasn't fit to make any decision concerning the Reconciliation, she'd be quite happy with the judgment. She'd leave the problem in surer hands than hers and return to the corridors around the basin, where she might after a time reinvent herself and come back into this temple as a novice, ready to learn the way to fold light. If, on the other hand, she was simply shunned, as Jokalaylau clearly wanted, if she was driven from this miraculous place back into the wilderness outside, what would she do? Without anyone to guide her, what knowledge did she possess to help choose between the ways ahead? None. Her tears dried after a time, but what came in their place was worse: a sense of desolation that could only be Hell itself, or some neighboring province, divided from the main by infernal jailers, made to punish women who had loved immoderately and who had lost perfection, for want of a little shame.

In his last letter to his son, written the night before he boarded a ship bound for France—his mission to spread the gospel of the Tabula Rasa across Europe—Roxborough, the scourge of Maestros, had set down the substance of an nightmare from which he'd just woken.

I dreamed that I drove in my coach through the damnable streets of Clerkenwell, he wrote, / *need not* name my destination. You know it, and you know too what infamies were planned there. As is the way in dreams, I was bereft of self-government, for though I called out many times to the driver, begging him, for my soul's sake, not to take me back to that house, my words had no power to persuade him. As the coach turned the corner, however, and the Maestro Sartori's house came in sight, Bellamare reared up affrighted and would go no further. She was ever my favorite bay, and I felt such a flood of gratitude towards her for refusing to carry me to that unholy step that I climbed from the coach to speak my thanks into her ear.

And lo! as my foot touched the ground the cobbles spoke up like living things, their voices stony but raised in a hideous lamentation, and at the sound of their anguish the very bricks of the houses in that street, and the roofs and railings and chimneys, all made similar cry, their voices joined in sorrowful testament to Heaven. I never heard a din its like, but I could not stop my ears against it, for was their pain not in some part of my making? And I heard them say:

Lord, we are but unbaptized things and have no hopes to come into your Kingdom, but we beseech

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you to bring some storm down upon us and grind us into dust with your righteous thunder, that we may be scourged and destroyed and not suffer complicity with the deeds performed in our sight.

My son, I marveled at their clamor, and wept too, and was ashamed, hearing them make this appeal to the Almighty, knowing that I was a thousand times more accountable than they. O! how I wished my feet might carry me away to some less odious place! I swear at that moment I would have judged the heart of a fiery furnace an agreeable place, and lain my head there with hosannahs, rather than be where these deeds had been done. But I could not retreat. On the contrary, my mutinous limbs carried me to the very doorstep of that house. There was foamy blood upon the threshold, as though the martyrs had that night marked the place so that the Angel of Destruction might find it, and cause the earth to gape 'neath it, and commit it to the Abyss. And from within was a sound of idle chatter as the men I had known debated their profane philosophies.

I went down on my knees in the blood, calling to those within to come out and join me in begging forgiveness of the Almighty, but they scorned me with much laughter, and called me coward and fool, and told me to go on my way. This I presently did, with much haste, and did escape the street with the cobbles telling me I should go about my crusade without fear of God's retribution, for I had turned my back on the sin of that house.

That was my dream. I am setting it down straightway, and will have this letter sent post haste, that you may be warned what harm there is in that place and not be tempted to enter Clerkenwell or even stray south of Islington while I am gone from you. For my dream instructs me that the street will be forfeit, in due course, for the crimes it has entertained, and I would not wish one hair of your sweet head harmed for the deeds I in my delirium committed

against the edicts of Our Lord. Though the Almighty did offer His only begotten Son to suffer and die for our sins, I know that He would not ask that same sacrifice of me, knowing that I am His humblest servant, and pray only to be made His instrument until I quit this vale and go to Judgment.

May the Lord God keep you in His care until I embrace you again.

The ship Roxborough boarded a few hours after finishing this letter went down a mile out of Dover harbor, in squall that troubled no other vessel in the vicinity but overturned the purger's ship and sank it in less than a minute. All hands were lost.

The day after the letter arrived, the recipient, still tearful with the news, went to seek solace at the stables of his father's bay, Bellamare. The horse had been jittery since her master's departure and, though she knew Roxborough's son well, kicked out at his approach, striking him in the abdomen. The blow was not instantly fatal, but with stomach and spleen split wide, the youth was dead in six days. Thus he preceded his father, whose body was not washed up for another week, to the family grave.

Pie 'oh' pah had recounted this sorry story to Gentle as they'd traveled from L'Himby to the Cradle of Chzercemitin search of Scopique. It was one of many tales the mystif had told on that journey, offering them not as biographical details, though of course many of them were precisely that, but as entertainment, comedic, absurd, or melancholy, that usually opened with: "I heard about this fellow once ..."

Sometimes the stories were told within a few minutes, but Pie had lingered over this one, repeating word for word the text of Roxborough's letter, though to this day Gentle didn't know how the mystif had come by it. He understood why it had committed the prophecy to memory, however, and why it had taken such trouble to repeat it for Gentle. It

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had half believed there was some significance in Roxborough's dream, and just as it had educated Gentle on other matters pertaining to his concealed self, so it had told this tale to warn the Maestro of dangers the future might bring.

That future was now. As the hours since Monday's return crept on, and Jude still didn't return, Gentle was reduced to picking his recollections of Roxborough's letter apart, looking for some clue in the purger's words as to what threat might be coming to the doorstep. He even wondered if the man who'd written the letter was numbered among the revenants who by midmorning could be glimpsed in the heat haze. Had Roxborough come back to watch the demise of the street he'd called damnable? If he had—if he listened at the step the way he had in his dream—he was most likely as frustrated as the occupants, wishing they'd get on with the work he hoped would invite calamity.

But however many doubts Gentle harbored concerning Jude, he could not believe she would conspire against the Great Work. If she said it was unsafe she had good reason for so saying, and, though every sinew in Gentle's body raged at inactivity, he refused to go downstairs and bring the stones up into the Meditation Room, for fear their very presence might tempt him into warming the circle. Instead he waited, and waited, and waited, while the heat outside rose and the air in the Meditation Room grew sour with his frustration. As Scopique had said, a working like this required months of preparation, not hours, and now even those hours were being steadily whittled away. How late could he afford to postpone the

ceremony before he gave up on Jude and began? Until six? Until nightfall? It was an imponderable.

There were signs of unease outside the house as well as in. Scarcely a minute went by without a new siren being added to the chorus of whoops and wails from every compass point. Several times through the morning, bells began chiming from steeples in the vicinity, their peals neither summons nor celebration but alarm. There were even cries occasionally: shouts and screams from distant streets car-

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ried to the open windows on air now hot enough to make the dead sweat.

And then, just after one in the afternoon, Clem came up the stairs, his eyes wide. It was Taylor who spoke, and there was excitement in his voice.

"Somebody's come into the house, Gentle."

"Who?"

"A spirit of some kind, from the Dominions. She's down the stairs."

"Is it Jude?"

"No. This is a real power. Can't you smell her? I know you've given up women, but your nose still works, doesn't it?"

He led Gentle out onto the landing. The house lay quiet below. Gentle sensed nothing.

"Where is she?"

Clem looked puzzled. "She was here a moment ago, I swear."

Gentle went to the top of the stairs, but Clem held him back.

"Angels first," he said, but Gentle was already beginning his descent, relieved that the torpor of the last few hours was over and eager to meet this visitor. Perhaps she carried a message from Jude.

The front door stood open. There was a pool of beer glinting on the step, but no sign of Monday.

"Where's the boy?" Gentle asked.

"He's outside, sky watching. He says he saw a flying saucer."

Gentle threw his companion a quizzical look. Clem didn't reply but laid his hand on Gentle's shoulder, his eyes going to the door of the dining room. From inside came the barely audible sound of sobbing.

"Mama," Gentle said, and gave up any caution, hurrying down the rest of the flight with Clem in pursuit.

By the time he reached Celestine's room, the sound of her sobs had already disappeared. Gentle drew a defensive breath, took hold of the handle, and put his shoulder to the door. It wasn't locked but swung open smoothly, delivering

him inside. The room was ill-lit, the drooping, mildewed curtains still heavy enough to keep the sun to a few dusty beams. They fell on the empty mattress in the middle of the floor. Its sometime occupant, whom Gentle had not expected to see standing again, was at the other end of the room, her tears subsided to whimpers. She had brought one of the sheets from her bed with her and, seeing her son enter, drew it up to her breastbone. Then she turned her attention back towards the wall she was standing close to and studied it. A pipe had burst somewhere behind the brick, Gentle supposed. He could hear water running freely.

"It's all right. Mama," he said. "Nothing's going to hurt you."

Celestine didn't reply. She'd raised her left hand in front of her face and was looking at the palm, as if into a mirror.

"It's still here," Clem said.

"Where?" Gentle asked him.

He nodded in the direction of Celestine, and Gentle instantly left his side, opening his arms as he went to offer the haunted air a fresh target.

"Come on," he said. "Wherever you are. Come on."

Halfway between the door and his mother he felt a cool drizzle strike his face, so fine it was invisible. Its touch was not unpleasant. In fact it was refreshing, and he let out an appreciative gasp.

"It's raining in here," he said.

"It's the Goddess," Celestine replied.

She looked up from studying her hand, which Gentle now saw was running with water, as though a spring had appeared in her palm.

"What Goddess?" Gentle asked her.

"Uma Umagammagi," his mother replied.

"Why were you crying, Mama?"

"I thought I was dying. I thought She'd come to take me."

"But She hasn't."

"I'm still here, child."

"Then what does She want?"

Celestine extended her arm to Gentle. "She wants us to make peace," she said. "Join me in the waters, child."

Gentle took hold of his mother's hand, and she drew him towards her, turning her face up to the rain as she did so. The last traces of her tears were being washed away, and a look of ecstasy appeared where there had been grief. Gentle felt it too. His eyes wanted to flicker closed; his body wanted to swoon. But he resisted the rain's blandishments, tempting as they were. If it carried some message for him, he needed to know it quickly and end these delays before they cost the Reconciliation dearly.

"Tell me," he said, as he came to his mother's side, "whether you're here to stay; tell me...."

But the rain made no reply, at least none that he could grasp. Perhaps his mother heard more than he did, however, because there were smiles on her glistening face, and her grip on Gentle's hand became more possessive. She let the sheet she'd held to her bosom drop, so that the rain could stroke her breasts and belly, and Gentle's gaze took full account of her nakedness. The wounds she'd sustained in her struggles with Dowd and Sartori still marked her body, but they only served to prove her perfection, and although he knew the felony here, he couldn't stem his feelings.

She put her free hand up to her face and with thumb and forefingers emptied the shallow pools of her sockets, then once again opened her eyes. They found Gentle too quickly for him to conceal himself, and he felt a shock as their looks met, not just because she read his desire, but because he found the same in her face.

He wrested his hand from hers and backed away, his tongue fumbling with denials. She was far less abashed than he. Her eyes remained fixed on him, and she called him back into the rain with words of invitation so soft they were barely more than sighs. When he continued to retreat, she turned to more specific exhortations.

"The Goddess wants to know you," she said. "She needs to understand your purpose."

"My... Father's... business," Gentle replied, the words

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as much defense as explanation, shielding him from this seduction with the weight of his purpose.

But the Goddess, if that was what this rain really was, wouldn't be shaken off so easily. He saw a look of distress cross his mother's face as the vapors deserted her to move in pursuit of him. They passed through a spear of sun as they came, and threw out rainbows.

"Don't be afraid of Her," Gentle heard Clem say behind him. "You've got nothing to hide."

Perhaps this was true, but he kept on retreating nevertheless, as much from his mother as from the vapor, until he felt the comfort of his angels at his back.

"Guard me," he told them, his voice tremulous.

Clem wrapped his arms around Gentle's shoulders. "It's a woman, Maestro," he murmured. "Since when were you afraid of women?"

"Since always," Gentle replied. "Hold on, for Christ's sake."

Then the rain broke against their faces, and Clem let out a sigh of pleasure as its languor enclosed them. Gentle seized hard hold of his protector's arms, his fingers digging deep, but if the rain had the sinew to detach him from Clem's embrace it didn't attempt to do so. It lingered around their heads for no more than thirty seconds, then simply passed away through the open door.

As soon as it had gone, Gentle turned to Clem. "Nothing to hide, eh?" he said. "I don't think She believed you."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. She just got inside my head. Why does every damn thing want to get inside my head?"

"It must be the view," Tay remarked, grinning with his lover's lips.

"She only wanted to know if your purpose was pure, child," Celestine said.

"Pure?" Gentle said, staring at his mother venomously. "What right has She got to judge me?"

"What you call your Father's business is the business of every soul in the Imajica."

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She had not yet claimed her modesty from the floor, and as she approached him he averted his eyes.

"Cover yourself, Mother," he said. "For God's sake, cover yourself."

Then he turned and headed out into the hallway, calling after the intruder as he went.

"Wherever you are," he yelled, "I want you out of this house! Clem, look downstairs. I'll go up."

He pelted up the flight, his fury mounting at the thought of this spirit invading the Meditation Room. The door stood open. Little Ease was cowering in the corner when he entered.

"Where is She?" Gentle demanded. "Is She here?"

"Is *who* here?"

Gentle didn't reply but went from wall to wall like a prisoner, beating his palms against them. There was no sound of running water from the brick, however, nor any drizzle, however fine, in the air. Content that the room was free of the visitor's taint, he returned to the door.

"If it starts raining in here," he said to Little Ease, "yell blue murder."

"Any color you like, Liberator."

Gentle slammed the door and headed along the landing, searching all the rooms in the same manner. Finding them empty he climbed the last flight and went through the rooms above. Their air was bone-dry.

But as he started back down the stairs he heard laughter from the street. It was Monday, though the sound he was making was lighter than Gentle had ever heard from his lips before. Suspicious of this music, he picked up the speed of his descent, meeting Clem at the bottom of the stairs and telling him the rooms were empty below, then racing across the hallway to the front door.

Monday had been busy with his chalks since Gentle had last crossed the threshold. The pavement at the bottom of the steps was covered with his designs: not copies of Glamour girls this time but elaborate abstractions that spilled over the curb and onto the sun-softened tarmac. The artist had left off his work, however, and was now standing in the

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middle of the street. Gentle recognized the language of his body instantly. Head thrown back, eyes closed, he was bathing in the air. "Monday!"

But the boy didn't hear. He continued to luxuriate in this unctious, the water running over his close-cropped skull like rippling fingers, and he might have gone on bathing until he drowned in it had Gentle's approach not driven the Goddess off. The rain went from the air in a heartbeat, and Monday's eyes opened. He squinted against the sky, his laughter faltering.

"Where'd the rain go?" he said. "There was no rain."

"What do you call this, boss?" Monday said, proffering arms from which the last of the waters still ran. "Take it from me, it wasn't rain."

"Whatever it was, it was fine by me," Monday said. He hauled his sodden T-shirt up over his head and used it as a mop to wipe his face. "Are you all right, boss?"

Gentle was scanning the street, looking for some sign of the Goddess.

"I will be," he said. "You go back to work, huh? You haven't decorated the door yet." "What do you want on it?"

"You're the artist," Gentle said, distracted from the conversation by the state of the street.

He hadn't realized until now how full of presences it had become, the revenants not simply occupying the pavement but hovering in the wilted foliage like hanged men or keeping their vigils on the eaves. They were benign enough, he thought. They had good reason to wish him well in this endeavor. Half a year ago, on the night he and Pie had left on their travels, the mystic had given Gentle a grim lesson in the pain that the spirits of this and every other Dominion suffered.

"No spirit is happy," Pie had said. "They haunt the doors, waiting to leave, but there's nowhere for them to

go."

But hadn't there been some hope mooted then, that at

the end of the journey ahead lay a solution to the anguish of the dead? Pie had known that solution even then, and must have longed to call Gentle Reconciler, to tell him that the wit lay somewhere in his head to open the doors at which the dead stood waiting and let them into Heaven.

"Be patient," he murmured, knowing the revenants heard. "It'll be soon, I swear. It'll be soon."

The sun was drying the Goddess's rain from his face, and, happy to stay out in the heat until he was dry, he wandered away from the house, while Monday resumed his whistling on the step. What a place this had become, Gentle thought: angels in the house behind him, lascivious rains in the street, ghosts in the trees. And he, the Maestro, wandering among them, ready to do the deed that would change their worlds forever. There would never be such a day again.

His optimistic mood darkened, however, as he approached the end of the street, for other than the sound of his footsteps, and the shrill noise of Monday's whistle, the world was absolutely quiet. The alarms that had raised such a din earlier in the day were now hushed. No bell rang, no voice cried out. It was as if all life beyond this thoroughfare had taken a vow of silence. He picked up his pace. Either his agitation was contagious or else the revenants that lingered at the end of the street were more jittery than those closer to the house. They milled around, their numbers, and perhaps their unease, sufficient to disturb the baked dust in the gutter. They made no attempt to impede his progress but parted like a cold curtain, allowing him to step over the invisible boundary of Gamut Street. He looked in both directions. The dogs that had gathered here for a time had gone; the birds had fled every eave and telephone wire. He held his breath and listened through the whine in his head for some evidence of life: an engine, a siren, a shout. But there was nothing. His unease now profound, he glanced back into Gamut Street. Loath though he was to leave it, he supposed it would be safe while the revenants remained at the perimeter. Though they were too insubstantial to protect the street from attackers, it was doubtful that anyone

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would dare enter while they milled and churned at the corner. Taking that small comfort, he headed towards Gray's Inn Road, his walk becoming a run as he went. The heat was less welcome now. It made his legs heavy and his lungs burn. But he didn't slacken his pace until he reached the intersection.

Gray's Inn Road and High Holborn were two of the city's major conduits. Had he stood at this corner on the coldest December midnight, there would have been some traffic upon one or the other. But there was nothing now; nor was there a murmur from any street, square, alleyway, or circus within earshot. The sphere of influence that had left Gamut Street untrammelled for two centuries had apparently spread, and if the citizens of London were still in residence they were keeping clear of this harrowed terrain. And yet, despite the silence, the air was not unladen. There was something else upon it, which kept Gentle from turning on his heel and wandering back to Gamut Street: a smell so subtle that the tang of cooking asphalt almost overwhelmed it, but so unmistakable he could not ignore even the traces that came his way. He lingered at the corner, waiting for another gust of wind. It came after a time, confirming his suspicions. There was only one source for this sickly perfume, and only one man in this city—no, in this Dominion—who had access to that source. The *In Ovo* had been opened again, and this time the beasts that had been called forth were not the nonsense stuff he'd encountered at the tower. These were of another magnitude entirely. He'd seen and smelled their like only once, two hundred years before, and they'd done incalculable mischief. Given that the breeze was so languid, their scent could not be coming all the way from Highgate. Sartori and his legion were considerably closer than that: perhaps ten streets away, perhaps two, perhaps about to turn the corner of Gray's Inn Road and come in sight.

There was no time left for prevarication. Whatever danger Jude had discovered, or believed she'd discovered, it was notional. This scent, on the other hand, and the entities that oozed it, were not. He

could not afford to delay his

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final preparations any longer. He forsook his watching place and started back toward the house as though these hordes were already on his heels. The revenants scattered as he rounded the corner and raced down the street. Monday was working on the door, but he dropped his colors as he heard the Maestro's summons.

"It's time, boy!" Gentle yelled, mounting the steps in a single bound. "Start bringing the stones upstairs."

"We're starting?"

"We're starting."

Monday grinned, whooped, and ducked into the house, leaving Gentle to pause and admire what now adorned the door. It was just a sketch as yet, but the boy's draftsmanship was sufficient for his purpose. He'd drawn an enormous eye, with beams of light emanating from it in all directions. Gentle stepped into the house, pleased at the thought that this burning gaze would greet anyone, friend or foe, who came to the threshold. Then he closed the door and bolted it. When I next step out, he thought, the work of my Father will be done.

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whatever debates and quarrels went on in Uma Uma-gammagi's temple while Jude waited on the shore, they brought the procession of postulants to a halt. The tide carried no more women or children to the shore, and after a time the waters became subdued and finally becalmed, as if their inspiring forces were so preoccupied that all other matters had become inconsequential. Without a watch Jude could only guess at how long a time passed while she waited, but occasional glances up at the comet showed her that it was to be measured in hours rather than minutes. Did the Goddesses fully comprehend how urgent a business this was, she wondered, or had the ages they'd spent in captivity and exile so slowed their sensibilities that their debate might last days and they not realize how much time had passed?

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She blamed herself for not making the urgency of this more plain to them. The day would be creeping on in the Fifth, and even if Gentle had been persuaded to postpone his preparations for a time, he would not do so indefinitely. Nor could she blame him. All he had was a message—brought by a less than reliable courier—that things were not safe. That wouldn't be enough to make him put the Recon?ciliation in jeopardy. He hadn't seen the horrors she'd seen in the Boston Bowl, so he had no real comprehension of what was at stake here. He was, in her own words, about his Father's business, and the possibility that such business might mark the end of the Imajica was surely very far from his mind.

She was twice distracted from these melancholy thoughts: the first time when a young girl came down to the shore to offer her something to eat and drink, which she gratefully accepted; the second when nature called and she was obliged to scout around the island for a sheltered place to squat and empty her bladder. To be shy about passing water in this place was of course absurd and she knew it, but she was still a woman of the Fifth, however many miracles she'd seen. Maybe she'd learn to become blithe about such functions eventually, but it would take time.

As she returned from the place she'd found among the rocks, lighter by a bladderful, the song at the temple door, which had dropped away to a murmur and disappeared long time before, began again. Instead of going back to her place of vigil, she headed around the temple to the door, her stride lent spring by the sight of the waters in the basin, which were stirring from their inertia and once again breaking against the shore. It seemed the Goddesses had made their decision. She wanted to hear the news as soon as possible, of course, but she couldn't help but feel a little like an accused woman returning into a courtroom.

There was an air of expectancy among those at the door. Some of the women were smiling; others looked grim. If they had any knowledge of the judgment, they were interpreting it in radically different ways.

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"Should I go in?" Jude asked the woman who'd brought her food.

The other nodded vigorously, though Jude suspected she simply wanted to expedite a process which had delayed them all. Jude stepped back through the water curtain and into the temple. It had changed. Though the sense that her inner and outer sights were here united was as strong as ever, what they perceived was far less reassuring than it had been. There was no sign of the origami light, nor of the bodies these forms had been derived from. She was, it seemed, the sole representative of the fleshly here, and scrutinized by an incandescence far less tender than Uma Umagammagi's gaze had been. She squinted against it, but her lids and lashes could do little to mellow a light that burned in her head rather than her corneas. Its blaze intimidated her, and she wanted to retreat before it, but the thought that Uma Umagammagi's consolation lay somewhere in its midst kept her from doing so.

"Goddess?" she ventured.

"We're here together," came the reply. "Jokalaylau, Ti-shalulle, and Myself."

As the roll was called, Jude began to distinguish shapes within the brilliance. They were not the inexhaustible glyphs she'd last seen in this place. What she saw suggested not abstractions but sinuous human forms, hovering in their above her. This was a strange turnabout, she thought. Why, when she'd previously been able to share the essential natures of Jokalaylau and Uma Umagammagi, was she now being presented with lowlier faces? It didn't augur well for the exchange ahead. Had they clothed themselves in trivial matter because they'd decided she wasn't worthy to lay eyes on the truth of them? She concentrated hard to grasp the details of their appearance, but either her sight wasn't sophisticated enough or they were resisting her. Which ever, she could hold only impressions in her head: that they were naked, that their eyes were incandescent, that their bodies ran with water.

"Do you see us?" Jude heard a voice she didn't recognize—Tishalulle's, she presumed—ask.

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"Yes, of course," she said. "But not... not completely."

"Didn't I tell you?" Uma Umagammagi said.

"Tell me what?" Jude wanted to know, then realized the remark wasn't directed at her but at the other Goddesses.

"It's extraordinary," said Tishalull?

The pliancy of Her voice was seductive, and as Jude attended to it Her nebulous form became more particular, the syllables bringing sight along with them. Her face was Oriental in cast, and without a trace of color in cheek or lip or lash. Yet what should have been bland was instead exquisitely subtle, its symmetry and its curves delineated by the light that flickered in Her eyes. Below its calm, Her body was another matter entirely. Her entire length was covered by what Jude at first took to be tattoos of some kind, following the sweep of Her anatomy. But the more she studied the Goddess—*and she did so without embarrassment*—the more she saw movement in these marks. They weren't *on* Her but *in* Her, thousands of tiny flaps opening and closing rhythmically. There were several shoals of them, she saw, each swept by independent waves of motion. One rose up from Her groin, where the inspiration of them all had its place; others swept down Her limbs, out to Her fingertips and toes, the motion of each shoal converging every ten or fifteen seconds, at which point a second substance seemed to spring from these slits, forming the Goddess afresh in front of Jude's astonished eyes.

"I think you should know that I've met your Gentle," Ti-shalutle" said. "I embraced him in the Cradle."

"He's not mine any longer," Jude replied.

"Do you care, Judith?"

"Of course she doesn't care," came Jokalaylau's response. "She's got his brother to keep her bed warm. The Autarch. The butcher of Yzordderrex."

Jude turned her gaze towards the Goddess of the High Snows. The particulars of Her form were more elusive than Tishalull's had been, but Jude was determined to know what She looked like, and fixed her gaze on the spiral of cold flame that burned in Her core, watching until it spat bright arcs out against the limits of Jokalaylau's body. The

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light of this collision was brief, but by it Jude got her glimpse. An imperious Negress, Her blazing eyes heavy-lid-den, hovered there, Her hands crossed at the wrist, then turned back on themselves to knit their fingers. She was not, after all, such a terrifying sight. But sensing that Her face had been found, the Goddess responded with a sudden transformation. Her lush features were mummified in a heartbeat, the eyes sinking away, the lips withering and retracting. Worms devoured the tongue that poked between Her teeth.

Jude let out a cry of revulsion, and the eyes reignited in Jokalaylau's sockets, the wormy mouth gaping as hard laughter rose from Her throat and echoed around the temple.

"She's not so remarkable, sister," Jokalaylau said. "Look at her shake."

"Let her alone," Uma Umagammagi replied. "Why must You always be testing people?"

"We've endured because We've faced the worse and survived," Jokalaylau replied. "This one would have died in the snow."

"I doubt that," Umagammagi said. "Sweet Judith—"

Still shaking, Jude took a moment to respond. "I'm not afraid of death," she said to Jokalaylau. "Or cheap tricks."

Again, Umagammagi spoke. "Judith," she said. "Look at Me."

"I just want Her to understand—"

"Sweet Judith ..."

"—I'm not going to be bullied."

"... look at Me."

Now Jude did so, and this time there was no need to pierce the ambiguities. The Goddess appeared to Jude without challenge or labor, and the sight was a paradox. Umagammagi was an ancient, Her body so withered it was almost sexless, Her hairless skull subtly elongated, Her tiny eyes so wreathed in creases they were barely more than gleams. But the beauty of Her glyph was here in this flesh: its ripples, its flickers, its ceaseless, effortless motion.

"Do you see now?" Uma Umagammagi said.

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"Yes, I see."

"We haven't forgotten the flesh We had," She said to Jude. "We've known the frailties of your condition. We remember its pains and discomforts. We know what it is to be wounded: in the heart, in the head, in the womb."

"I see that," Jude said.

"Nor would We have trusted you with knowledge of Our frailty, unless We believed that you might one day be among Us."

"Among You?"

"Some divinities arise from the collective will of peoples; some are made in the heat of stars; some are abstractions. But some—dare we say the finest, the most loving?—are the higher minds of living souls. We are such divinities, sister, and Our memories of the lives We lived and the deaths We died are still sharp. We understand you, sweet Judith, and We don't accuse you."

"Not even Jokalaylau?" Jude said.

The Goddess of the High Snows made Herself apparent to Her length and breadth, showing Jude Her entire form in a single glance. There was a paleness moving beneath Her skin, and Her eyes, that had been so luminous, were dark. But they were fixed on Jude. She felt the stare like a stab.

"I want you to see," She said, "what the Father of the father of the child in you did to My devotees."

Jude recognized the paleness now. It was a blizzard, driven through the Goddess's form by pain, and

pricking every part of Her. Its drifts were mountainous, but at Jokalaylau's behest they moved and uncovered the site of an atrocity. The bodies of women lay frozen where they'd fallen, their eyes carved out, their breasts taken off. Somewhere close to smaller bodies: violated children, dismembered babes.

"This is a little part of a little part of what He did," Jokalaylau said.

Appalling as the sight was, Jude didn't flinch this time, but stared on at the horror until Jokalaylau drew a cold shroud back over it.

"What are You asking me to do?" Jude said. "Are You

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telling me I should add another body to the heap? Another child?" She laid her hand on her belly. "This child?"

She hadn't realized until now how covetous she felt of the soul she was nurturing.

"It belongs to the butcher," Jokalaylau said.

"No," Jude quietly replied. "It belongs to me."

"You'll be responsible for its works?"

"Of course," she said, strangely exhilarated by this promise. "Bad can be made from good, Goddess; whole things from broken."

She wondered as she spoke if They knew where these sentiments originated; whether They understood that she was turning the Reconciler's philosophies to her own maternal ends. If They did, They seemed not to think less of her for it.

"Then Our spirits go with you, sister," Tishalulle' said.

"Are You sending me away again?" Jude asked.

"You came here looking for an answer, and We can provide it."

"We understand the urgency of this," Uma Umagam-magi said. "And We haven't held you here without cause. I've been across the Dominions while you waited, looking for some clue to this puzzle. There are Maestros waiting in every Dominion to undertake the Reconciliation—"

"Then Gentle didn't begin?"

"No. He's waiting for your word."

"And what should I tell him?"

"I've searched their hearts, looking for some plot—"

"Did You find any?"

"No. They're not pure, of course. Who is? But all of them want the Imajica whole. All of them believe the work?ing they're ready to perform can succeed,"

"Do You believe it too?"

"Yes, We do," said Tishalulle. "Of course they don't re?alize they're completing the circle. If they did, perhapsthey'd think again."

"Why?"

"Because the circle belongs to Our sex, not to theirs," Jokalaylau put in.

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"Not true," Umagammagi said. "It belongs to any mind that cares to conceive it."

"Men are incapable of conceiving, sister," Jokalaylau re?plied, "Or hadn't You heard?"

Umagammagi smiled. "Even that may change, if We can coax them from their terrors."

Her words begged many^questions, and She knew it. Hereyes fixed on Jude, and She said, "We'll have time for these works when you come back. But now I know you need to be fleet."

"Tell Gentle to be a Reconciler," TishatUll6 said, "But share nothing that We've said with him."

"Do I have to be the one to tell him?" Jude said to Uma?gammagi. "If You've been there once, can't You go again and give him the news? I want to stay here."

"We understand. But he's in no mood to trust Us, be?lieve me. The message must come from you, in the flesh."

"I see," Jude said.

There was no room for persuasion, it seemed. She had the plain answer she'd come here hoping to find. Now she had to return to the Fifth with it, unpalatable as that journey would be.

"May I ask one question before I go?" she said.

"Ask it," said Umagammagi.

"Why did You show Yourself to me this way?"

It was Tishalulle' who replied. "So that you'll know Us when We come to sit at your table or walk beside you in the street," She said.

"Will you come to the Fifth?"

"Perhaps, in time. We'll have work there, when the Rec?onciliation's achieved."

Jude imagined the transformations she'd seen outside wrought in London: Mother Thames climbing her

banks, depositing the filth she'd been choked by in Whitehall and the Mall, then sweeping through the city, making its squares into swimming pools and its cathedrals into playgrounds. The thought made her light.

"I'll be waiting for you," she said and, thanking them, made her departure.

When she got outside the waters were waiting for her, the surf lush as pillows. She didn't delay, but went straight down the beach and threw herself into its comfort. This time there was no need to swim; the tide knew its business. It picked her up and carried her across the basin like a foamy chariot, delivering her back to the rocks from which she'd first taken her plunge. Lotti Yap and Paramarola had gone, but finding her way out of the palace would be easier now than when she'd first arrived. The waters had been at work on many of the corridors and chambers that ran around the basin, and on the courtyards beyond, opening up vistas of glittering pools and fountains that stretched to the rubble of the palace gates. The air was clearer than it had been, and she could see the Kesperates spread below. She could even see the harbor, and the sea at its walls, its own tide longing, no doubt, to share this enchantment.

She made her way back to the staircase, to find that the waters that had carried her here had receded from the bottom, leaving heaps of flotsam and jetsam behind. Picking through it, like a beachcomber granted her paradise, was Lotti Yap, and sitting on the lower steps, chatting to Paramarola, Hoi-Polloi Peccable.

After they'd greeted each other, Hoi-Polloi explained how she'd prevaricated before committing herself to the river that had separated her from Jude. Once she jumped in, however, it had carried her safely through the palace and delivered her to this spot. Minutes later it had been called to other duties and disappeared.

"We'd pretty much given up on you," said Lotti Yap. She was busy plucking the petitions and prayers from among the trash, unfolding them, scanning them, then pocketing them. "Did you get to see the Goddesses?"

"Yes, I did,"

"Are They beautiful?" Paramarola asked.

"In a way."

"Tell us every detail."

"I haven't time. I have to get back to the Fifth."

"You got your answer, then," Lotti said.

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"I did. And we've got nothing to fear."

"Didn't I tell you?" she replied. "Everything's well with the world."

As Jude started to pick her way through the debris, Hoi-Polloi said, "Can two of us go?"

"I thought you were going to wait with us," Paramarolasaid.

"I'll come back and see the Goddesses," Hoi-Polloi replied. "I'd like to see the Fifth before everything changes. It is going to change, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Jude said.

"Do you want something to read on your travels?" Lottiasked them, proffering a fistful of petitions. "It's amazing, what people write."

"All those should go to the island," Jude said. "Take them with you. Leave them at the temple door."

"But the Goddesses can't answer every prayer," Lottisaid. "Lost lovers, crippled children—"

"Don't be so sure," Jude told her. "It's going to be a new day."

Then, with Hoi-Polloi at her side, she made the hour's second round of farewells and headed away in the general direction of the gate.

"Do you really believe what you said to Lotti?" Hoi-Polloi asked her when they'd left the staircase far behind. "Is tomorrow going to be so different from today?"

"One way or another," Jude said.

The reply was more ambiguous than she'd intended, but then perhaps her tongue was wiser than it knew. Though she was going from this holy place with the word of powers far more discerning than she, their reassurance could not quite erase the memory of the bowl in Oscar's treasure room and the prophecy of dust it had shown her.

She silently admonished herself for her lack of faith. Where did this seam of arrogance come from, that she could doubt the wisdom of Uma Umagammagi Herself? From now on, she would put such ambivalence away. Maybe tomorrow, or some blissful day after, she'd meet the God-

desses on the streets of the Fifth and tell Them that even after Their comforts she'd still nursed some ridiculous nub of doubt. But for today she'd bow to Their wisdoms and return to the Reconciler as a bearer of good news.

Gentle wasn't the only occupant of the house in Gamut Street who'd smelled the In Ovo on the late-afternoon breeze; so had one who'd once been a prisoner in that Hell between Dominions: Little Ease. When Gentle returned to the Meditation Room, having set Monday the task of bringing the stones up the stairs and sent Clem around the house securing it, he found his sometime tormentor up at the window. There were tears on its cheeks, and its teeth were chattering uncontrollably.

"He's coming, isn't he?" it said. "Did you see him, Liberator?"

"Yes, he is, and no, I didn't," Gentle said. "Don't look so terrified, Easy. I'm not going to let him lay a finger on you."

The creature put on its wretched grin, but with its teeth in such motion the effect was grotesque.

"You sound like my mother," it said. "Every night she used to tell me: nothing's going to hurt you, nothing's going to hurt you."

"I remind you of your mother?"

"Give or take a tit," Little Ease replied. "She was no beauty, it has to be said. But all my fathers loved her."

There was a din from downstairs, and the creature jumped.

"It's all right," Gentle said. "It's just Clem closing the shutters."

"I want to be of some use. What can I do?"

"You can do what you're doing. Watch the street. If you see anything out there—"

"I know. Scream blue murder."

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With the windows shuttered below, the house was thrown into a sudden dusk, in which Clem, Monday, and Gentle labored without word or pause. By the time all the stones had been fetched upstairs the day outside had also dwindled into twilight, and Gentle found Little Ease leaning out of the window, stripping fistfuls of leaves from the tree outside and flinging them back into the room. When he asked it what it was up to it explained that, with evening fallen, the street was invisible through the foliage, so it was clearing it away.

"When I begin the Reconciliation maybe you should keep watch from the floor above," Gentle suggested.

"Whatever you suggest, Liberator," Little Ease said. It slid down from the sill and stared up at him. "But before I go, if you don't mind, I have a little request," it said.

"Yes?"

"It's delicate."

"Don't be afraid. Ask it."

"I know you're about to start the working, and I think this may be the last time I have the honor of your company. When the Reconciliation's achieved you'll be a great man. I don't mean to say you're not one already," it added hurriedly. "You are, of course. But after tonight everyone will know you're the Reconciler, and you did what Christ Himself couldn't do. You'll be made Pope, and you'll write your memoirs"—Gentle laughed—"and I'll never see you again. And that's as it should be. That's right and proper. But before you become hopelessly famous and feted, I wondered: would you ..., bless me?"

"Bless you?"

Little Ease raised its long-fingered hands to ward off the rejection it thought was coming. "I understand! I understand!" it said. "You've already been kind to me beyond measure—"

"It's not that," said Gentle, going down on his haunches in front of the creature the way he had when its head had been beneath Jude's heel. "I'd do it if I could. But Ease, I

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don't know how. I'm not a Messiah. I've never had a ministry. I've never preached a gospel or raised the dead."

"You've got your disciples," Little Ease said.

"No. I've had some friends who've endured me, and some mistresses who've humored me. But I've never had the power to inspire. I frittered it away on seductions. I don't have the right to bless anybody."

"I'm sorry," the creature said. "I won't mention it again."

Then it did again what it had done when Gentle had set it free: took his hand and laid its brow upon his palm.

"I'm ready to die for you, Liberatore."

"I'm hoping that won't be necessary."

Little Ease looked up. "Between us?" it said. "So am I."

Its oath made, it returned to gathering up the leaves it had deposited on the floor, putting plugs of them up its nose to stop the stench. But Gentle told it to let the rest lie. The scent of the sap was sweeter than the smell that would permeate the house if, or rather when, Sartori arrived. At the mention of the enemy, Little Ease hoisted itself back up onto the sill.

"Any sign?" Gentle asked it.

"Not that I see."

"But what do *you feel*?"

"Ah," it said, looking up through the canopy of leaves. "It's such a beautiful night, Liberatore. But he's going to try and spoil it."

"I think you're right. Stay here a while longer, will you? I want to go around the house with Clem. If you see anything—"

"They'll hear me in L'Himby," Ease promised.

The beast was as good as its word. Gentle hadn't reached the bottom of the stairs when it set up a din so loud it brought dust from the rafters. Yelling for Monday and Clem to make sure all the doors were bolted, Gentle started up the stairs again, reaching the summit in time to see the door of the Meditation Room flung open and Little Ease backing through it at speed, shrieking. Whatever warning the creature was trying to offer, it was incomprehensible.

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Gentle didn't try and interpret it, but raced towards the room, drawing his breath in readiness to drive Sartori's invaders out. The window was empty when he entered, but the circle was not. Within the ring of stones two forms were unknitting themselves. He'd never seen the phenomenon of passage from this perspective before, and he stood as much aghast as awed. There were too many raw surfaces in this process for comfortable viewing. But he studied the forms with mounting excitement, certain long before they were reconstituted that one of the travelers was Jude. The other, when she appeared, was a cross-eyed girl of seven or so, who fell to her knees sobbing with terror and relief the moment her muscles were her own again. Even Jude, who'd made this journey four times now, was shaking violently and would have fallen when she stepped from the circle had Gentle not caught her up.

"The In Ovo..." she gasped, "almost had us...."

Her leg had been gouged from knee to ankle.

"... felt teeth in me...."

"You're all right," Gentle said. "You've still got two legs. Clem! Clem!"

He was already at the door, with Monday in pursuit.

"Have we got something to bind this up?"

"Of course! I'll go—"

"No," said Jude. "Take me down. This is no floor to bleed on."

Monday was left to comfort Hoi-Polloi, while Clem and Gentle carried Jude to the door.

"I've never seen the In Ovo like that before," she said. "Crazy...."

"Sartori's been in," Gentle said, "finding himself an army."

"He certainly stirred them up."

"We were about to give up on you," Clem said.

Jude raised her head. Her skin was waxen with shock, and her smile too tentative to be joyful. But it was

there, atleast.

"Never give up on the messenger," she said. "Especially if she's got good news."

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It was three hours and four minutes to midnight, and there wasn't time for a lengthy exchange, but Gentle wanted some explanation—however brief—of what had taken Jude to Yzordderrex. So she was made comfortable in the frontroom, which Monday's scavengings had furnished with pillows, foodstuffs, and even magazines, and there, while Clembound her leg and foot, she did her best to encapsulate all that had happened to her since she'd left the Retreat.

It didn't make easy telling, and there were a couple of occasions when she attempted to describe scenes in Yzordderrex and simply gave up, saying that she knew no words to describe what she'd witnessed and felt. Gentle listened without once interrupting her, though his expression grew grimmer when she told of how Uma Umagammagi had passed through the Dominions, seeking out the Synod to be certain their motives were pure.

When she was finished he said, "I was in Yzordderrex too. It's changed quite a bit,"

"For the better," Jude said.

"I don't like ruin, however picturesque it is," Gentle replied.

Jude eyed him strangely at this, but she said nothing.

"Are we safe here?" Hoi-Polloi said, addressing nobody in particular. "It's so dark."

"'Course we're safe," Monday said, putting his arm around the girl's shoulders. "We got the whole fuckin' place sealed up. He's not going to get in, is he, boss?"

"Who?" Jude asked.

"Sartori," said Monday.

"Is he somewhere in the vicinity?"

Gentle's silence was reply enough.

"And you think a few locks are going to keep him out?"

"Won't they?" said Hoi-Polloi.

"Not if he wants to get in," Jude said.

"He won't," Gentle replied. "When the Reconciliation begins, there's going to be a flow of power through this house...my Father's power."

The thought was as distasteful to Jude as Gentle as-

sumed it would be to Sartori, but her response was subtler than revulsion.

"He's your brother," she reminded him, "Don't be so sure he won't want a taste of what's in here. And if he does, he'll come and get it."

He stared hard at her.

"Are we talking about power, here, or you?"

Jude took a moment before replying. Then she said, "Both."

Gentle shrugged. "If that happens, you'll make your decision," he said. "You've made them before, and you've been wrong. Maybe it's time to have a little faith, Jude." He stood up. "Share what the rest of us already know," he said.

"And what's that?"

"That in a few hours we'll be standing in a legendary place."

Monday softly said, "Yeah," and Gentle smiled.

"Take care down here, all of you," he said, and headed to the door.

Jude reached for Clem, and with his help hauled herself to her feet. By the time she reached the door Gentle was already on the stairs.

She didn't say his name. He simply stopped for a moment and, without turning, said, "I don't want to hear."

Then he continued his ascent, and she knew by the slope of his shoulders and the weight of his tread that for all his prophetic talk there was a little worm of doubt in him just as there was in her, and he was afraid that if he turned and saw her, it would fatten on their look and choke him.

The scent of sap was waiting for him on the threshold, and as he'd hoped it masked the sourer smell from the darkened streets outside. Otherwise his room, in which he'd lounged and laughed and debated the conundrums of the cosmos, offered no solace. It suddenly seemed to him a stagnant place, too well feited and swayed for its own good: the last place on earth to perform his work. But then hadn't he berated Jude, just moments ago, for not having sufficient faith? There was no great power in geography. It was all

rooted in the Maestro's faith in the miraculous, and in the will that sprang from that faith.

In preparation for the work ahead, he undressed. Once naked, he crossed to the mantelpiece, intending to fetch the candles off it and set them around the circle. But the sight of their flames in flickering array made him think instead of worship, and he dropped to his knees in front of the empty grate to pray. The Lord's Prayer came most readily to his lips, and he recited it aloud. Its sentiments had never been apter, of course. But after tonight it would be a museum piece, a relic of a time before the Lord's Kingdom had

come and His will be done, on Earth and in Heaven.

A touch on the back of his neck brought this recitation to a halt. He opened his eyes, raised his head, turned. The room was empty, but his nape still tingled where the touch had come. This wasn't memory, he knew. It was something more delicate than that, a reminder of the other prize that lay at the end of this night's work. Not glory, not the gratitude of the Dominions: Pie 'oh' pah. He looked up at the stained wall above the mantelpiece and seemed for a moment to see the mystic's face there, changing with each flicker of the candlelight. Athanasius had called the love he felt for the mystic profane. He hadn't believed it then, and he didn't now. The purpose that was in him as Reconciler and the desire he felt for reunion were part of the same plan.

The prayer was gone from his tongue. No matter, he thought; I'm its executor now. He got up, took one of the candles from the mantelpiece, and, smiling, stepped over the perimeters of the circle, not as a simple traveler but as a Maestro, ready to use its engine to a miraculous end.

2

Lying on the cushions in the lounge below, Jude felt the flow of energies start. They ached in her chest and belly, like mild dyspepsia. She rubbed her stomach, in the hope of soothing the discomfort, but it did little good, so she got to her feet and hobbled out, leaving Monday to entertain Hoi-

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Polloi with his chatter and his handiwork. He'd taken to drawing on the walls with the smoke from one of the candles, enhancing the marks with his chalks. Hoi-Polloi was much impressed, and her laughter, the first Jude had ever heard from the girl, followed her out into the hallway, where she found Clem standing guard beside the locked front door.

They stared at each other in the candlelight for several seconds before she said, "Do you feel it too?"

"Yep. It's not very pleasant, is it?"

"I thought it was only me," she said.

"Why only you?"

"I don't know, some kind of punishment...."

"You still think he's got some secret agenda, don't you?"

"No," Jude said, glancing up the stairs. "I think he's doing what he believes is best. In fact I know it. Uma Uma-gammagi got inside his head—"

"God, he hated that."

"She gave him a good report, whether he hated it or not."

"So?"

"So there's still a conspiracy somewhere."

"Sartori?"

"No. It's something to do with their Father and this damn Reconciliation." She winced as the discomfort in her belly became more severe. "I'm not afraid of Sartori. It's what's going on in this house"—she gritted her teeth as another wave of pain passed through her system—"that I can't quite trust."

She looked back at Clem and knew that, as ever, he'd listen as a loving friend, but she could expect no support from him. He and Tay were the angels of the Reconciliation, and if she pressed them to decide between her welfare and that of the working, she'd be the loser.

The sound of Hoi-Polloi's laughter came again, not as feathery as before, but with an undertow of mischief Jude knew was sexual. She turned her back on the sound and on Clem, and her gaze came to rest on the door of the one room in this house she'd never entered. It stood a little ajar,

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and she could see that candles were burning inside. Of all the company to seek out when she was in need of comfort, Celestine's was the least promising, but all other avenues were closed to her. She crossed to the door and pushed it open. The mattress was empty, and the candle beside it was burning low. The room was too large to be illuminated by such a fitful flame, and she had to study the darkness until she found its occupant. Celestine was standing against the far wall.

"I'm surprised you came back," she said.

Jude had heard many exquisite speakers since she'd last heard Celestine, but there was still something extraordinary in the way the woman mingled voices: one running beneath the other, as though the part of her touched by divinity had never entirely married with a baser self.

"Why surprised?"

"Because I thought you'd stay with the Goddesses."

"I was tempted," Jude replied.

"But finally you had to come back. For him."

"I was a messenger, that's all. I've got no claims on Gentle now."

"I didn't mean Gentle."

"I see."

"I meant—"

"I know who you meant."

"Can't you bear to have his name spoken?"

Celestine had been staring at the candle flame, but now she looked up at Jude.

"What will you do when he's dead?" she asked. "He *will* die, you realize that? He has to. Gentle'll want to be mag?nanimous, the way victors are supposed to be; he'll want to forgive all his brother's trespasses. But there'll be too many demands for his head."

Until now Jude hadn't contemplated the possibility of Sartori's demise. Even in the tower, knowing Gentle had gone in pursuit of his brother intending to stop his malice, she'd never believed he'd die. But what Celestine said was undoubtedly true. There were countless claims upon his

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head, both secular and divine. Even if Gentle was forgiving, Jokata ytau wouldn't be; nor would the Unbeheld.

"You're very alike, you know, you and he," Celestine said. "Both copies of a finer original."

"You never knew Quaisoir," Jude replied. "You don't know whether she was finer or not."

"Copies are always coarser. It's their nature. But at least your instinct's good. You and he belong together. That's what you're pining for, isn't it? Why don't you admit it?"

"Why should I pour out my heart to you?"

"Isn't that what you came in here to do? You won't get any sympathy out there."

"Listening by the door now?"

"I've heard everything that's gone on in this house since I was brought here. And what I haven't heard, I've felt. And what I haven't felt, I've predicted."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing that child Monday will end up coupling with the little virgin you brought back from Yzordder-rex."

"That scarcely takes an oracle."

"And the Oviate isn't long for this world."

"The Oviate?"

"It calls itself Little Ease. The beast you had under your heel. It asked the Maestro to bless it a little while ago. It'll murder itself before daybreak."

"Why would it do that?"

"It knows when Sartori perishes it'll be forfeit too, however much allegiance it's sworn to the winning side. It's sensible. It wants to choose its moment."

"Am I supposed to find some lesson in that?"

"I don't think you're capable of suicide," Celestine said.

"You're right. I've got too much to live for."

"Motherhood?"

"And the future. There's going to be a change in this city. I've seen it in Yzordderrex already. The waters will rise—"

"—and the great sisterhood will dispense love from on high."

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"Why not? Clem told me what happened when the Goddess came. You were in ecstasies, so don't try and deny it."

"Maybe I was. But do you imagine that's going to make you and me sisters? What have we got in common, besides our sex?"

The question was meant to sting, but its plainness made Jude see the questioner with fresh eyes. Why was Celestine so eager to deny any other link between them but womanhood? Because another such link existed, and it was at the very heart of their enmity. Nor, now that Celestine's conquest had freed Jude from reverence, was it difficult to see where their stories intersected. From the beginning, Celestine had marked Jude out as a woman who stank of coitus. Why? Because she too stank of coitus. And this business with the child, which came up again and again: that had the same root. Celestine had also borne a baby for this dynasty of Gods and demigods. She too had been used and had never quite come to terms with the fact. When she raged against Jude, the tainted woman who would not concede her error in being sexual, in being fecund, she was raging against some fault in herself.

And the nature of that fault? It wasn't difficult to guess, or to put words to. Celestine had asked a plain question. Now it was Jude's turn.

"Was it really rape?" she said.

Celestine glanced up, her look venomous. The denial that followed, however, was measured. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Well, now," Jude replied, "how else can I put it?" She paused. "Did Sartori's Father take you against your will?"

The other woman now put on a show of comprehension, followed by one of shock.

"Of course He did," she said. "How could you ask such a thing?"

"But you knew where you were going, didn't you? I realize Dowd drugged you at the start, but you weren't in a coma all the way across the Dominions. You knew something extraordinary was waiting at the end of the trip."

"I don't—"

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"Remember? Yes, you do. You remember every mile of it. And I don't think Dowd kept his mouth shut all those weeks. He was pimping for God, and he was proud of it. Wasn't he?"

Celestine offered no riposte. She simply stared at Jude, daring her to go on, which Jude was happy to do.

"So he told you what lay ahead, didn't he? He said that you were going to the Holy City and you were going to see the Unbeheld Himself. Not just see Him but be loved by Him. And you were *flattered*,"

"It wasn't like that."

"How was it then? Did He have His angels hold you down while He did the deed? No, I don't think so. You lay there and you let Him do what the hell He wanted, because it was going to make you into the bride of God and the mother of Christ—"

"Stop!"

"If I'm wrong, tell me how it was. Tell me you screamed and fought and tried to tear out His eyes."

Celestine continued to stare, but said nothing.

"That's why you despise me, isn't it?" Jude went on. "That's why I'm the woman who stinks of coitus. Because I lay down with a piece of the same God that you did, and you don't like to be reminded of the fact."

"Don't judge me, woman!" Celestine suddenly shouted.

"Then don't you judge me! *Woman*. I did what I wanted with the man I wanted, and I'm carrying the consequences. You did the same. I'm not ashamed of it. You are. That's why we're not sisters, Celestine."

She'd said her piece, and she wasn't much interested in a further round of insults and denials, so she turned her back and had her hand on the door when Celestine spoke. There were no denials. She spoke softly, half lost to memory.

"It was a city of iniquities," she said. "But how was I to know that? I thought I was blessed among women, to have been chosen. To be God's—"

"Bride?" Jude said, turning back from the door.

"That's a kind word," Celestine said. "Yes. Bride." She drew a deep breath. "I never even saw my husband."

"What did you see?"

"Nobody. The city was full, I know it was full, I saw shadows at the window, I saw them close up the doors when I passed, but nobody showed their faces."

"Were you afraid?"

"No. It was too beautiful. The stones were full of light, and the houses were so high you could barely see the sky. It was like nothing I'd ever seen. And I walked, and I walked, and I kept thinking, He'll send an angel for me soon, and I'll be carried to His palace. But there were no angels. There was just the city, going on and on in every direction, and I got tired after a time. I sat down, just to rest for a few minutes, and I fell asleep."

"You fell asleep?"

"Yes. Imagine! I was in the City of God, and I fell asleep. And I dreamed I was back at Tyburn, where Dowd had found me. I was watching a man being hanged, and I dug through the crowd until I was standing under the gallows." She raised her head. "I remember looking up at him, kicking at the end of his rope. His breeches were unbuttoned, and his rod was poking out."

The look on her face was all disgust, but she drove herself on to finish the story.

"And I lay down under him. I lay down in the dirt in front of all these people, with him kicking, and his rod getting redder and redder. And as he died he spilled his seed. I wanted to get up before it touched me, but my legs were open, and it was too late. Down it came. Not much. Just a few spurts. But I felt every drop inside me like a little fire, and I wanted to cry out. But I didn't, because that was when I heard the voice."

"What voice?"

"It was in the ground underneath me. Whispering."

"What did it say?"

"The same thing, over and over again: *Nisi Nirvana, Nisi Nirvana. Nisi... Nirvana.*"

In the process of repeating the words, tears began to flow copiously. She made no attempt to stem them, but the repetition faltered.

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"Was it Hapexamendios talking to you?" Jude asked.

Celestine shook her head. "Why should He speak to me? He had what He needed. I'd lain down and dreamed while He dropped His seed. He was already gone, back to His angels."

"So who was it?"

"I don't know. I've thought about it over and over. I even made it into a story, to tell the child, so that when I'd gone he'd have the mystery for himself. But I don't think I ever really wanted to know. I was afraid my heart would burst if I ever knew the answer. I was afraid the heart of the world would burst."

She looked up at Jude.

"So now you know my shame," she said.

"I know your story," said Jude. "But I don't see any reason for shame."

Her own tears, which she'd been holding back since Celestine had begun to share this horror with her, fell now, flowing a little for the pain she felt and a little for the doubt that still churned in her, but mostly for the smile that came onto Celestine's face when she heard Jude's reply, and for the sight of the other woman opening her arms and crossing the room, to embrace her like a loved one who'd been lost and found again before some final fire.

22

I

If coming to the moment of Reconciliation had been for Gentle a series of rememberings, leading him back to himself, then the greatest of those rememberings, and the one he was least prepared for, was the Reconciliation itself.

Though he'd performed the work before, the circumstances had been radically different. For one, there'd been all the hoopla of a grand event. He'd gone into the circle like a prizefighter, with an air of congratulation hanging

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around his head before he'd even worked up a sweat, his patrons and admirers cheering through at the sidelines. This time he was alone. For another, he'd had his eyes on what the world would shower on him when the work was done: what women would fall to him, what wealth and glory would come. This time, the prize in sight was a different thing entirely, and wouldn't be counted in stained sheets and coinage. He was the instrument of a higher and wiser power.

That fact took the fear away. When he opened his mind to the process, he felt a calm come upon him, subduing the unease he'd felt climbing the stairs. He'd told Jude and Clem that forces would run through the house the likes of which its bricks had never known, and it was true. He felt them fuel his weakening mind, ushering his thoughts out of his head to gather the Dominion to the circle.

That gleaning began with the place he was sitting in. His mind spread to all compass points, and up and down, to have the sum of the room. It was an easy space to grasp. Generations of prison poets had made the analogies for him, and he borrowed them freely. The walls were his body's limits, the door his mouth, the windows his eyes: commonplace similitudes, taxing his power of comparison not a jot. He dissolved the boards, the plaster, the glass, and all the thousand tiny details in the same lyric of confinement and, having made them part of him, broke their bounds to stray farther afield.

As his imagination headed down the stairs and up onto the roof, he felt the beginnings of momentum. His intellect, dogged by literalism, was already lagging behind a sensibility more mercurial, which was delivering back to him similitudes for the whole house before his logical faculties had even reached the hallway.

Once again, his body was the measure of all things: the cellar, his bowels; the roof, his scalp; the stairs, his spine. Their proofs delivered, his thoughts flew out of the house, rising up over the slates and spreading through the streets. He gave passing consideration to Sartori as he went, knowing his other was out here in the night somewhere, skulking.

But his mind was quicksilver, and too exhilarated by its speed and capacity to go searching in the shadows for an enemy already defeated.

With speed came ease. The streets were no more difficult to claim than the house he'd already devoured. His body had its conduits and its intersections, had its places of excrement and its fine, dandified facades; had its rivers, moving from a springing place, and its parliament, and its holy seat. The whole city, he began to see, could be analogized to his flesh, bone, and blood. And why should that be so surprising? When an architect turned his mind to the building of a city, where would he look for inspiration? To the flesh where he'd lived since birth. It was the first model for any creator. It was a school and an eating house and an abattoir and a church; it could be a prison and a brothel and Bedlam. There wasn't an edifice in any street in London that hadn't begun somewhere in the private city of an architect's anatomy, and all Gentle had to do was open his mind to that fact and the districts were his, running back to swell the assembly in his head.

He flew north, through Highbury and Finsbury Park, to Palmer's Green and Cockfosters. He went east with the river, past Greenwich, where the clock that marked the coming of midnight stood, and on towards Tilbury. West took him through Marylebone and Hammersmith, south through Lambeth and Streatham, where he'd first met Pie'oh' pah, long ago.

But the names soon became irrelevant. Like the ground seen from a rising plane, the particulars of a street or a district became part of another pattern, even more appetizing to his ambitious spirit. He saw the Wash glittering to the east, and the Channel to the south, becalmed on this humid night. Here was a fine new challenge. Was his body, which had proved the equal of a city, also the measure of this vaster geography? Why not? Water flowed by the same laws everywhere, whether the conduit was a groove in his brow or a rift between the continents. And were his hands not like two countries, laid side by side in his lap, their

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peninsulas almost touching, their landscapes scarred and grooved?

There was nothing outside his substance that was not mirrored within: no sea, no city, no street, no roof, no room. He was in the Fifth, and the Fifth in him, gathering to be carried into the Ana as a proof and a map and a poem, written in praise of all things being One..

In the other Dominions the same pursuit of similitude was under way.

From his circle on the Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw had already drawn into his net of dissolution both the city of Patashoqua and the highway that ran from its gates towards the mountains. In the Third, Scopique—his fears that the absence of the Pivot would invalidate his working allayed—was spreading his grasp across the Kwem towards the dustbowls around Mai-ke". In L'Himby, where he was soon to arrive, there were celebrants gathering at the temples, their hopes raised by prophets who'd appeared from hiding the night before to spread the word that the Reconciliation was imminent.

No less inspired, Athanasius was presently traveling back along the Lenten Way to the borders of the Third and skimming the ocean to the islands, while a self more tender trod the changed streets of Yzordderrex. He found challenges there unknown to Scopique, Tick Raw, or even Gentle. There were slippery wonders loose on the streets that defied easy analogy. But in inviting Athanasius to join the

Synod, Scopique had chosen better than he knew. Theman's obsession with Christos, the bleeding God, gave him a grasp of what the Goddesses had wrought that a man lesspreoccupied by death and resurrection would never haveowned. In Yzordderrex's ravaged streets he saw a reflectionof his own physical ravagement. And in the music of theiconoclastic waters an echo of the blood that ran from his wounds, transformed—by love of the Holy Mother he hadworshipped—into a sublime and healing liquor.

Only Chicka Jackeen, at the borders of the First Domin?ion, had to work with abstractions, for there was nothing of

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a physical nature he could win similitudes from. All he had was the blank wall of the Erasure to set his mind on. Of theDominion that lay beyond—which it fell to him to encapsu?late and carry into the Ana—he had no knowledge.

He hadn't spent so many years studying the mysterywithout finding some means to tussle with it, however. Al?though his body offered no analogy for the enigma that layon the other side of the divide, there was a place in him justas sealed from sight, and just as open to the inquiries madeby dreaming explorers like himself. He let mind—the un-beheld process that empowered every meaningful action,that made the very devotion that kept him in his circle—behis similitude. The blank wall of the Erasure was the whitebone of his skull, scoured of every scrap of meat and hair.The force inside, incapable of impartial self-study, was boththe God of the First and the thoughts of Chicka Jackeen,bonded by mutual scrutiny.

After tonight, both would be free of the curse of invisibil?ity. The Erasure would drop and the Godhead come backinto view to walk the Imajica. When that happened, whenthe same Godhead who'd taken the Nullianacs into His fur?nace and burned their malice away, was no longer dividedfrom His Dominions, there would be a revelation such ashad never been known before. The dead, trapped in theircondition and unable to find the door, would have a light to lead the way. And the living, no longer afraid to show theirminds, would step from their houses like divinities,, carryingtheir private heavens upon their heads for all to see.

About his own work, Gentle had little grasp of what his fel?low Maestros were achieving, but the absence of alarm fromthe other Dominions reassured him that all was well. All thepains and humiliations he'd endured to reach this place hadbeen repaid in the little hours since he'd stepped into the circle. An ecstasy he'd only known for the duration of a heartbeat suffused him, confounding the conviction he'd had that such feelings only came in glimpses because toknow them for longer would burst the heart. It wasn't so. The ecstasy went on and on, and he was surviving it: more

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than surviving, burgeoning, his authority over the working stronger with every city and sea he retrieved into the circlewhere he sat.

The Fifth was almost there with him now, sharing thespace, teaching him with its coming where the true power ofa Reconciler lay. It wasn't a skill with feits and sways, norwas it pneumas, nor resurrections, nor the driving out of de?mons. It was the strength to call the myriad wonders of anentire Dominion by the names of his body and not be bro?ken by the simile; to allow that he was in the world to ittssmallest degree, and the world in him, and not be driven toinsanity by the intricacies he contained or else so enamored of the panoramas he was spread through that he lost allmemory of the man he'd been.

There was such pleasure in this process that laughter began to shake him as he sat in the circle. His good humor wasn't a distraction from his purpose but instead made it easier still, his laugh-lightened thoughts running from the circle out to regions both bright and benighted and coming back with their prizes like runners sent with poems to a promised land, and returning with it on their backs, flowering as it came.

2

In the room above, Little Ease heard the laughter and capered in sympathy with the Liberator's joy. What else could such a sound mean, but that the deed was close to being done? Even if it didn't see the consequences of this triumph, it thought, its last night in the living world had been immeasurably sweetened by all it had been a party to. And should there be an afterlife for such creatures as itself (although of this it was by no means certain), then its account of this night would be a fine tale to tell when it went into the company of its ancestors.

Anxious not to disturb the Reconciler, it gave up its dance of celebration and was about to return to the window and its duties as night watchman when it heard a sound its paddings had concealed. Its gaze went from the sill to the

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ceiling. The wind had got up in the last little while and was skittering across the roof, rattling the slates as it went, or so Ease thought, until it realized the tree outside was as still as the Kwem at equinox.

Little Ease didn't come from a tribe of heroes; quite the reverse. The legends of its people concerned famous apologetists, humblers, deserters, and cowards. Its instinct, hearing this sound from above, was to be away downstairs as fast as its bandy legs knew how. But it fought what came naturally, for the Reconciler's sake, and cautiously approached the window in the hope of gaining a glimpse of what was happening above.

It climbed up onto the sill and, belly up, slid itself out a little way, peering up at the eaves. A mist dirtied the starlight, and the roof was dark. It leaned a little farther out, the sill hard beneath its bony back. From the window below, the sound of the Reconciler's laughter floated up, its music reassuring. Little Ease had time to smile, hearing it. Then something as dark as the roof and as dirty as the fog that covered the stars reached down and stopped its mouth. The attack came so suddenly Little Ease lost its grip on the window frame and toppled backwards, but its smotherer had too tight a hold on it to let it drop, and hauled it up onto the roof. Seeing the assembly there, Ease knew its errors instantly. One, it had stopped its nostrils and so failed to smell this congregation. Two, it had believed too much in a theology which taught that evil came from below. Not so, not so. While it had watched the street for Sartori and his legion, it had neglected the route along the roofs, which was just as secure for creatures as nimble as these.

There were not more than six of them, but then there didn't need to be. The gek-a-gek were feared among the feared; Oviates that only the most overweening of Maestros would have called into the Dominions. As massive as tigers, and as sleek, they had hands the size of a man's head and heads as flat as a man's hand. Their flanks were translucent in some lights, but here they had made a pact with darkness, and they lay—all but the smotherer—at the apex of the

roof, their silhouettes concealing the Maestro until he rose and murmured that the captive be brought to his feet.

"Now, Little Ease," he said, the words too soft to be heard in the rooms below, but loud enough to make the creature evacuate its bowels in terror, "I want you to spill more than your shite for me."

3

It gave Sartori no satisfaction to watch Little Ease's life go out. The sense of exhilaration he'd felt at dawn when, having summoned the gek-a-gek, he'd contemplated the confrontation that lay a few hours off, had been all but sweated out of him by the heat of the intervening day. The gek-a-geks were powerful beasts and might well have survived the journey from Shiverick Square to Gamut Street, but no Oviate was fond of the light from any heaven, and rather than risk their debilitation, he'd stayed beneath the trees with his pride, counting off the hours. Only once had he ventured from their company and had found the streets deserted. This sight should have heartened him. With the area deserted and the creatures would be unwitnessed when they moved on the enemy. But sitting in the silent bower with his dozing legion, undistracted by even the sound of a fly, his mind had been preyed upon by fears he'd always put away until now, fears fueled by the sight of these empty streets.

Was it possible that his revisionist purposes were about to be overwhelmed by some still greater revision? He realized his dreams of a New Yzordderrex were valueless. He'd said as much to his brother in the tower. But even if he wasn't to be an empire builder here, he still had something to live for. She was in the house in Gamut Street, yearning for him, he hoped, as he yearned for her. He wanted continuance, even if it was as Hell to Gentle's Heaven. But the desertion of this city made him wonder if even that was a pipe dream.

As the afternoon had crept on, he'd begun to look forward to reaching Gamut Street, simply for the signs of life it would provide. But he'd arrived to find precious little com-

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fort here. The phantoms that lingered at the perimeter only reminded him of how uncharitable death really was, and the sounds that issued from the house itself (a girl's giggling from one of the lower rooms, and later full-throated laughter, his brother's, from the Meditation Room) only seemed to him signs of an idiot optimism.

He wished he could scour these thoughts from his head, but there was no escape from them except, possibly, in the arms of his Judith. She was in the house, that he knew. But with the currents unleashed inside so strong, he dared not enter. What he wanted, and what he finally got from Little Ease, was intelligence as to her state and whereabouts. He'd assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that Judith was with the Reconciler. She'd taken herself off to Yzordderrex, Little Ease said, and come back with fabulous tales. But the Reconciler had not been much impressed by them. There'd been a fracas, and he'd begun his working alone.

Why had she gone in the first place? he inquired, but the creature claimed it didn't know and could not be persuaded to supply an answer even though its limbs were half twisted off and its brain pan opened to the gek-a-gek's tongue. It had died protesting its ignorance, and Sartori had left the pride to toy with the carcass, taking himself off along the roof to turn over what he'd learned.

Oh, for a wad of kreauchee, to subdue his impatience, or else make him brave enough to beat on the door and tell her to come out and make love among the phantoms. But he was too tender to face the

currents. There'd come a time, -very soon, when the Reconciler, his gathering completed, would retire to the Ana. At that juncture the circle, its power no longer needed as a conduit to carry the analogues back into its reservoir, would turn off those currents and turn its attention to conveying the Reconciler through the In Ovo. There, in that window between the Reconciler's removal to the Ana and the completion of the working, he would act. He'd enter the house and let the gek-a-gek take Gentle (and any who rose to protect him) while he claimed Judith.

Thinking of her, and of the kreauchee he yearned for, he

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brought the blue egg out of his pocket and put it to his lips. He'd kissed its cool a thousand times in the last few hours; licked it; sucked it. But he wanted it deeper inside him, locked up in his belly as she would be when they'd mated again. He put it in his mouth, threw back his head, and swallowed. It went down easily, and granted him a few minutes of calm while he waited for the hour of his deliverance.

Had Gem's head not had two tenants he might well have forsaken his place at the front door during the hours in which the Reconciler worked above. The currents which that process had unleashed had made his belly ache at the outset, but after a time their effect mellowed, suffusing his system with a serenity so persuasive he'd wanted to find a place to lie down and dream. But Tay had policed such dereliction of duty severely, and whenever Clem's attention strayed he felt his lover's presence—which was so subtly wed and interwoven with his thoughts it only became apparent when there was a conflict of interests—rousing him to fresh vigilance. So he kept his post, though by now it was surely an academic exercise.

The candle he had set beside the door was drowning in its own wax, and he had just stooped to wick the lip and let the excess flow off when he heard something hitting the step outside, the sound like that of a fish being slapped on a slab. He gave up his candle work and put his ear to the door. There was no further sound. Had a fruit fallen from the tree outside the house, he wondered, or was there some strange rain tonight? He went from the door, through to the room where Monday had been entertaining Hoi-Polloi. They'd left it for some more private place, taking two of the cushions with them. The thought that there were lovers in the house tonight pleased him, and he silently wished them well as he crossed to the window. It was darker outside than he'd expected, and though he had a view of the step he couldn't distinguish between objects lying upon it and the designs that Monday had drawn there.

Perplexed rather than anxious, he went back to the front door and listened again. There were no further sounds, and

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he was tempted to let the matter alone. But he half hoped some visionary rain had indeed begun to fall, and he was too curious to ignore the mystery. He moved the candle from the door, the wax snuffing the flame as he did so. No matter. There were other candles burning at the bottom of the stairs, and he had sufficient light to find the bolts and slide them back.

In Celestine's room, Jude woke and raised her head from the mattress where she'd laid it an hour before. The conversation between the women had continued for some while after their peacemaking, but Jude's exhaustion had finally caught up with her, and Celestine had suggested she rest for a while, which,

reassured by Celestine's presence, she'd gladly done. Now she stirred to find that Celestine had also succumbed, her head on the mattress, her body on the floor. She was snoring softly, undisturbed by whatever had woken Jude.

The door was slightly ajar, and a perfume was coming through it, stirring a faint nausea in Jude's system. She sat up and rubbed at the crick in her neck, then got to her feet. She'd slipped off her shoes before she lay down, but rather than search for them in the darkened room she went out into the hallway barefoot. The smell was much stronger now. It was coming from the street outside, its route plain. The front door was open, and the angels who'd been guarding it were gone.

Calling Clem's name, she crossed the hallway, her steps slowing as she approached the open door. The candles at the stairs were bright enough to shed some light upon the step. There was something glistening there. She picked up her speed again, asking for the Goddesses to be with her and with Clem. Don't let this be him, she murmured, seeing that it was tissue glistening, and blood in a pool around it; please don't let this be him.

It wasn't. Now that she was almost at the threshold she saw the remnants of a face there and knew it: Sartori's agent, Little Ease. Its eyes had been scooped out, and its mouth, which had spewed pleas and flattery in such abun-

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dance, was tongueless. But there was no doubting its identity. Only a creature of the In Ovo could still twitch as this did, refusing to give up the semblance of life even if the fact of it had gone.

She looked beyond the trophy into the murk of the street, calling Clem's name again. There was no answer at first. Then she heard him, his shout half smothered. "Go back inside! For—God's—sake, go back!"

"Clem?" She stepped out of the house, bringing new cries of alarm from the darkness.

"Don't! Don't!"

"I'm not going back without you," she said, avoiding the Oviat's head as she advanced.

She heard something let out a soft sound as she did so, like a creature growling with its maw full of bees. "Who's there?" she said.

There was no reply at first, but she knew it would come if she waited, and whose voice it would be when it did. She did

not anticipate the nature of the reply, however, or its falling

note.

"It wasn't supposed to happen this way," Sartori said.

"If you've hurt Clem—"

"I've no wish to hurt anybody."

She knew that was a lie. But she also knew he'd do Clem no harm as long as he needed a hostage.

"Let Clem go," she said. "Will you come to me if I do?"

She left a decent pause before replying, so as not to seem too eager. "Yes," she said. "I'll come." "No, Judy!" Clem said. "Don't. He's not alone." She could see that now, as her eyes became more accustomed to the darkness. Sleek, ugly beasts prowled back and forth. One was up on its back legs, sharpening its claws on the tree. Another was in the gutter, close enough for her to see its innards through its translucent skin. Their ugliness didn't distress her. Around the fringes of any drama such detritus was bound to accrue: scraps of discarded characters, soiled costumes, cracked masks. They were irrelevant, and her lover had taken them for company because he

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felt a kinship with them. She pitied them. But him, who'd been most high, she pitied more.

"I want to see Clem here on the step before I make amove," she said.

There was a pause, then Sartori said, "I'm going to trust you."

His words were followed by further sounds from the Ovi-ates that paced in the murk, and Jude saw two of them slope out of the shadows, with Clem between them, his arms in their throats. They came close enough to the pavement for her to see the foam of appetite that rose from their lips; then they literally spat their prisoner free. Clem fell face down on the road, his hands and arms covered in their muck. She wanted to go to his aid there and then, but though the captors had retreated, the tree gouger had turned and lowered its shovel head, its eyes, black as a shark's, flickering back and forth in their bulbous sockets, hungry to have the frail meat on the road. If she moved she feared it would pounce, so she kept her place on the step while Clem hauled himself to his feet. His arms were blistered by the Ovi-ate's spittle, but he was otherwise intact.

"I'm all right, Judy," he murmured. "Go back inside."

She stayed put, however, waiting until he was up and staggering across the pavement before she started down the steps.

"Go back!" he told her again.

She put her arms around him and whispered. "Clem. I don't want you to argue with this. Go into the house and lock the door. I'm not coming with you."

He started to speak, but she hushed him.

"No argument, I said. I want to see him, Clem. I want to...be with him. Now, *please*, if you love me, go inside and close the door."

She felt reluctance in his every sinew, but he knew too much about the business of love, especially love that defied orthodoxy, to attempt to reason with her.

"Just remember what he's done," he said, as he let her go.

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"That's all part of it, Clem," she said, and slipped past him.

It was easy to leave the light behind. The ache which the currents had woken in her marrow diminished with every yard she put between herself and the house, and the thought of the embrace ahead quickened her step. This was what she wanted, and what he wanted too. Though the first causes of this passion were gone—one to dust, one to divinity—she and the man in the darkness were its embodiments and could not be denied each other.

She glanced back towards the house once only, to see that Clem was lingering on the step. She didn't waste time trying to persuade him to go inside, but simply turned back to the shadows.

"Where are you?" she said.

"Here," her lover replied, and stepped from the folds of his legion.

A single strand of luminescent matter came with him, fine enough to have been woven by Oviatic spiders, but clotted here and there with beads like pearls, which swelled and dropped from the filaments, running down his arms and face and mottling the ground where he walked. The light flattered him, but she was too hungry for the truth of his face to be deceived, and piercing the glamour with her stare found him much reduced. The shining dandy she'd first met in Klein's plastic garden had gone. Now his eyes were heavy with despair, his mouth drawn down at the corners, his hair awry. Perhaps he'd always looked like this, and he'd simply used some piffling sway to mask the fact, but she doubted it. He was changed on the outside because something had changed within.

Though she stood before him defenseless, he made no move to touch her, but hung back like a penitent in need of invitation before he approached the altar. She liked this new fastidiousness.

"I didn't hurt the angels," he said softly.

"You shouldn't even have touched them."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," he said again.

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"The gek-a-gek were clumsy. They dropped some meat from the roof."

"I saw."

"I was going to wait until the power subsided and come for you in style." He paused, then asked, "Would you have let me take you?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't certain. I was a little afraid you'd reject me, and then I'd become cruel. You're my sanity now. I can't go on without you,"

"You went on all those years in Yzordderrex."

"I had you there," he said, "only by a different name."

"And you were still cruel."

"Imagine how much cruder I would have been," he said, as if amazed at the possibility, "if I hadn't had your face to mellow me."

"Is that all I am to you? A face?"

"You know better than that," he said, his voice dropping "to a whisper.

"Tell me," she said, inviting his affections.

He glanced back over his shoulder, towards the legion. If he spoke to them she didn't hear it. They simply retreated, cowed by his glance. When they were gone, he put his hand to her face, his little fingers just beneath the line of her jaw, his thumbs laid lightly at the corners of her mouth. Despite the heat that was still rising from the cooked asphalt, his skin was chilly.

"One way or another," he said, "we don't have very long, so I'll keep this simple. There's no future for us now. Maybe there was yesterday, but tonight..."

"I thought you were going to build a New Yzordderrex."

"I was. I have the perfect model for it, here." His thumbs went from the corners of her mouth to the middle of her lips and stroked them. "A city made in your image, built in place of these miserable streets."

"But now?"

"We don't have the time, love. My brother's about his work up there, and when he's finished"—he sighed, his voice dropping lower still—"when he's finished—"

"What?" she said. There was something he wanted to share, but he was forbidding himself.

"I hear you went back to Yzordderrex," he said.

She wanted to press him to complete his earlier explanation, but she knew better than to push too hard, so she answered him, knowing his earlier doubts could surface again if she was patient. Yes, she said,

she had indeed been to Yzordderrex, and she'd found the palace much changed. This sparked his interest.

"Who's taken it over? Not Rosengarten? No. The Dearthers. That damn priest Athanasius—"

"None of those."

"Who then?"

"Goddesses."

The web of luminescence fluttered around his head, shaken by his distress.

"They were always there," she told him. "Or at least one was, a Goddess called Uma Umagammagi. Have you ever heard of Her?"

"Legends—"

"She was in the Pivot."

"That's impossible," he said. "The Pivot belongs to the Unbeheld. The whole of the Imajica belongs to the Un-beheld."

She'd never heard of a breath of subservience in him before, but she heard it now.

"Does He own us too?" she asked him.

"We may escape that," he said. "But it'll be hard, love. He's the Father of us all. He expects to be obeyed, even to the very end." Again an aching pause, but this time a request on its heels. "Will you embrace me?" he asked her.

She answered with her arms. His hands slid from her face and through her hair to clasp behind her.

"I used to think it was a godlike thing to build cities," he murmured. "And if I built one fine enough it would stand forever, and so would I. But everything passes away sooner or later, doesn't it?"

She heard in his words a despair that was the inverse of Gentle's visionary zeal, as though in the time she'd known

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them they'd exchanged their lives. Gentle the faithless lover had become a dealer in heavens, while Sartori, the sometime maker of hells, was here holding out love as his last salvation.

"What is God's work," she asked him quietly, "if it's not the building of cities?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well... maybe it's none of our business," she said, pretending a lover's indifference to matters of moment. "We'll forget about the Unbeheld. We've got each other. We've got the child. We can be together for as long as we like."

There was enough truth in these sentiments, enough hope in her that this vision might come true, that using it for manipulative purpose sickened her. But having turned her back on the house and all it contained, she could hear in her lover's whispers echoes of the same doubts that had made her an outcast, and if she had to use the feelings between them as a way to finally solve the enigma, so be it. Her queasiness at her deceit wasn't soothed by its effectiveness. When Sartori let out a tiny sob, as he did now, she wanted to confess her motives. But she fought the desire and let him suffer, hoping that he'd finally purge himself of all he knew, -even though she suspected he'd never dared even *shape* these thoughts before, much less speak them.

"There'll be no child," he said, "no being together."

"Why not?" she said, still striving to keep her tone optimistic. "We can leave now, if you want. We can go any-where and hide away."

"There are no hiding places left," he said.

"We'll find one."

"No. There are none."

He drew away from her. She was glad of his tears. They were a veil between his gaze and her duplicity.

"I told the Reconciler I was my own destroyer," he said. "I said I saw my works, and I conspired against them. But then I asked myself, Whose eyes am I seeing with? And you know what the answer is? My Father's eyes, Judith. My Father's eyes...."

Of all the voices to return into Jude's head as he spoke, it

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was Clara Leash's she heard. Man the destroyer, willfully undoing the world. And what more perfect manhood was there than the God of the First Dominion?

"If I see my works with these eyes and want to destroy them," Sartori murmured, "what does He see? What does He want?"

"Reconciliation," she said.

"Yes. But why? It's not a beginning, Judith. It's the end. When the Imajica's whole, He'll turn it into a wasteland."

She drew away from him. "How do you know?"

"I think I've always known."

"And you said nothing? All your talk about the future—"

"I didn't dare admit it to myself. I didn't want to believe I was anything but my own man. You understand that. I've seen you fight to see with your own eyes. I did the same. I couldn't admit He had any part of me, until now." "Why now?"

"Because I see you with my eyes. I love you with *my*

heart. I love you, Judith, and that means I'm free of Him. I can admit... what...I... *know*."

He dissolved in grief, but his hands kept hold of her as he shook.

"There's nowhere to hide, love," he said. "We've got a few minutes together, you and I: a few sweet moments. Then it's over."

She heard everything he said, but her thoughts were as much with what was going on in the house behind her. Despite all she'd heard from Uma Umagammagi, despite the zeal of the Maestro, despite all the calamities that would come with her interference, the Reconciliation had to be halted.

"We can still stop Him," she said to Sartori. "It's too late," he replied. "Let Him have His victory. We can defy Him a better way. A purer way."

"How?" "We can die together."

"That's not defying Him. It's defeat."

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"I don't want to live with His presence in me. I want to lie down with you and die. It won't hurt, love."

He opened his jacket. There were two blades at his belt. They glittered by the light of the floating threads, but his eyes glittered more dangerously still. His tears had dried. He looked almost happy.

"It's the only way," he said.

"I can't."

"If you love me you will."

She drew her arm from his grasp. "I want to live," she said, backing away from him.

"Don't desert me," he replied. There was warning in his voice as well as appeal. "Don't leave me to my Father. Please. If you love me don't leave me to my Father. Judith!"

He drew the knives out of his belt and came after her, offering the handle of one as he came, like a merchant selling suicide. She swiped at the proffered blade, and it went from his grasp. As it flew she turned, hoping to the Goddess that Clem had left the door open. He had; and lit every candle he could find, to judge by the spill of light onto the step. She picked up her pace, hearing Sartori's voice behind her as she went. He only spoke her name, but the threat in it was unmistakable. She didn't reply—her flight from him was answer enough—but when she reached the pavement she glanced back at him. He was picking up the dropped knife, and rising.

Again he said, "*Judith* —"

But this time it was a warning of a different order. Off to her left a motion drew her glance. One of the gek-a-gek, the sharpener, was coming at her, its flat head now wide as a manhole and toothed to its gut.

Sartori yelled an order, but the thing was rogue and came on at her unchecked. She raced for the step, and as she did so heard a whoop from the door, Monday was there, naked but for his grimy underwear: in his hand, a homemade bludgeon, which he swung around his head like a man possessed. She ducked beneath its sweep as she made the step. Clem was behind him, ready to haul her in, but she turned to call Monday to retreat, in time to see the gek-a-gek

mounting the step in pursuit. Her defender didn't retreat, but brought the weapon down in a whistling arc, striking the gek-a-gek's gaping head. The bludgeon shattered, but the blow sheared off one of the beast's bulbous eyes. Though wounded, its mass was still sufficient to carry it forward, and one of its freshly honed claws found Monday's back as he returned to dodge it. The boy shrieked and might have fallen beneath the Oviate's attack if Clem hadn't grabbed his arms and all but thrown him into the house.

The half-blinded beast was a yard from Jude's feet, its head thrown back as it raged in pain. But it wasn't the maw she was watching. It was Sartori. He was once again walking towards the house, a knife in each hand, and a gek-a-gek at each heel. His eyes were fixed on her. They shone with sorrow.

"In!" Clem yelled, and she relinquished both sight and step to pitch herself back over the threshold.

The one-eyed Oviate came after her as she did so, but Clem was fast. The heavy door swung closed, and Hoi-Pot-loi was there to fling the bolts across, leaving the wounded beast and its still more wounded master out in the darkness.

On the floor above, Gentle heard nothing of this. He had finally passed, via the circle's good offices, through the InOvo and into what Pie had called the Mansion of the Nexus, the Ana, where he and the other Maestros would undertake the penultimate phase of the working. The conventional life of the senses was redundant in this place, and for Gentle being here was like a dream in which he was knowing but unknown, potent but unfixed. He didn't mourn the body he'd left in Gamut Street. If he never inhabited it again it would be no loss, he thought. He had a far finer condition here, like a figure in some exquisite equation that could neither be removed nor reduced but was all it had to be—no more, no less—to change the sum of things.

He knew the others were with him, and though he had no sight to see them with, his mind's eye had never owned so vast a palette as it did now, nor had his invention ever been finer. There was no need for cribbing and forgery here. He

had earned with his metempsychosis access to a visionary grasp he'd never dreamt of possessing, and his imagination brimmed with correlatives for the company he kept.

He invented Tick Raw dressed in the motley he'd first seen the man wear in Vanaeph, but fashioned now from the wonders of the Fourth. A suit of mountains, dusted in Jokalaylaurian snow; a shirt of Patashoqua, belted by its walls; a shimmering halo of green and gold, casting its light down on a face as busy as the highway. Scopique was a less gaudy sight, the gray dust of the Kwem billowing around

him like a shredded coat, its particles etching the glories of the Third in its folds. The Cradle was there. So were the temples at L'Himby; so was the Lenten Way. There was even a glimpse of the railroad track, the smoke of its locomotive rising to add its murk to the storm.

Then Athanasius, dressed in a clout of dirty cloth and carrying in his bleeding hands a perfect representation of Yzordderrex, from the causeway to the desert, from the harbor to Ipse, The ocean ran from his wounded flank, and the crown of thorns he wore was blossoming, throwing petals of rainbow light down upon all he bore. Finally, there was Chicka Jackeen, here in lightning, the way he'd looked two hundred midsummers before. He'd been weeping, then, and waxen with fright. But now the storm was his possession, not his scourge, and the arcs of fire that leapt between his fingers were a geometry, austere and beautiful, that solved the mystery of the First, and in unveiling it made perfection the new enigma.

Inventing them this way, Gentle wondered if they in turn were inventing him, or whether his painter's hunger to see was an irrelevancy to them, and what they imagined, knowing he was with them, was a body subtler than any sight. It would be better that way, he supposed, and with time he'd learn to rise out of his literalisms, just as he'd shrug off the self that wore his name. He had no attachment to this Gentle left, nor to the tale that hung behind. It was tragedy, that self; any self. It was a marriage made with loss, and had he not wanted one last glimpse of Pie 'oh' pah, he might have

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prayed that his reward for Reconciliation would be this state in perpetuity.

He knew that wasn't plausible, of course. The Ana's sanctuary existed for only a brief time, and while it did so it had more ecumenical business than nurturing a single soul. The Maestros had served their purpose in bringing the Dominionions into this sacred space, and would soon be redundant. They would return to their circles, leaving Dominion to meld with Dominion, and in so doing drive the In Ovo back like a malignant sea. What would happen then was a matter of conjecture. He doubted there'd be an instant of revelation—all the nations of the Fifth waking to their unfettered state in the same moment. It would most likely be slow, the work of years. Rumors at first, that bridges wreathed in fogs could be found by those eager enough to look. Then the rumors becoming certainties, and the bridges becoming causeways, and the fogs great clouds, until, in a generation or two, children were born who knew without being taught that the species had five Dominions to explore and would one day discover its own Godhood in its wanderings. But the time it took to reach that blessed day was unimportant. The moment the first bridge, however small, was forged, the Imajica was whole; and at that moment every soul in the Dominion, from cradle to deathbed, would be healed in some tiny part and take their next breath lighter for the fact.

Jude waited in the hall long enough to be sure that Monday wasn't dead; then she headed towards the stairs. The currents which had induced such discomforts were no longer circling in the system of the house: sure sign that some new phase of the working—possibly its last—was under way above. Clem joined her at the bottom of the stairs, armed with another two of Monday's homemade bludgeons.

"How many of these creatures are there out there?" he demanded.

"Maybe half a dozen."

"You'll have to watch the back door then," he said, thrusting one of the weapons at Jude.

"You use it," she said, 'pressing past him. "Keep them out for as long as you can."

"Where are you going?"

"To stop Gentle."

"Stop him? In God's name, why?"

"Because Dowd was right. If he completes the Recon?ciliation we're dead."

He cast the bludgeons aside and took hold of her. "No, Judy," he said. "You know I can't let you do that."

It wasn't just Clem speaking, but Tay as well: two voices and a single utterance. It was more distressing than anything she'd heard or seen outside, to have this command issue from a face she loved. But she kept her calm.

"Let go of me," she said, reaching for the banister to haul herself up the stairs.

"He's twisted your mind, Judy," the angels said. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I know damn well," she said, and fought to wrest herself free.

But Clem's arms, despite their blistering, were unyielding. She looked for some help from Monday, but he and Hoi-Polloi had their backs to the door, against which the gek-a-gek were beating their massive limbs. Stout as the timbers were, they'd splinter soon. She had to get to Gentle before the beasts got in, or it was all over.

And then, above the din of assault, came a voice she'd only heard raised once before.

"Let her go."

Celestine had emerged from her bedroom, draped in a sheet. The candlelight shook all around her, but she was steady, her gaze mesmeric. The angels looked around at her, Clem's hands still holding Jude fast.

"She wants to—"

"I know what she wants to do," Celestine said. "If you're our guardians, guard us now. *Let her go.*"

Jude felt doubt loosen the hold on her. She didn't give the angels time to change their mind, but dragged herself free and started up the stairs again. Halfway up, she heard a shout and glanced down to see both Hoi-Polloi and Monday

thrown forward as the door's middle panel broke and a prodigious limb reached through to snatch at the

air.

"Go on!" Celestine yelled up to her, and Jude returned to her ascent as the woman stepped onto the bottom stair to guard the way.

Though there was far less light above than below, the details of the physical world became more insistent as she climbed. The flight beneath her bare feet was suddenly a wonderland of grains and knotholes, its geography entrancing. Nor was it simply her sight that filled to brimming. The banister beneath her hand was more alluring than silk; the scent of sap and the taste of dust begged to be sniffed and savored. Defying these distractions, she fixed her attention on the door ahead, holding her breath and removing her hand from the banister to minimize the sources of sensation. Even so, she was assailed. The creaks of the stairs were rich enough to be orchestrated. The shadows around the door had nuances to parade and called for her devotion. But she had a rod at her back: the commotion from below. It was getting louder all the time, and now—cutting through the shouts and roars—came the sound of Sartori's voice.

"Where are you going, love?" he asked her. "You can't leave me. I won't let you. Look! Love? Look! I've brought the knives."

She didn't turn to see, but closed her eyes and stopped her ears with her hands, stumbling up the rest of the stairs blind and deaf. Only when her toes were no longer stubbed, and she knew she was at the top, did she dare the sight again. The seductions began again, instantly. Every nick in every nail of the door said, *Stop and study me*. The dust rising around her was a constellation she could have lost herself in forever. She pitched herself through it, with her gaze glued to the door handle, and clasped it so hard the discomfort canceled the beguiling long enough for her to turn it and throw the door open. Behind her Sartori was calling again, but this time his voice was slurred, as though he was distracted by profusion.

In front of her was his mirror image, naked at the center of the stones. He sat in the universal posture of the medita-

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tor: legs crossed, eyes closed, hands laid palms out in his lap to catch whatever blessings were bestowed. Though there was much in the room to call her attention—mantelpiece, window, boards, and rafters—their sum of enticements, vast as it was, could not compete with the glory of human nakedness, and *this* nakedness, that she'd loved and lain beside, more than any other. Neither the blandishments of the walls—their stained plaster like a map of some unknown country—nor the persuasions of the crushed leaves at the sill could distract her now. Her senses were fixed on the Reconciler, and she crossed the room to him in a few short strides, calling his name as she went.

He didn't move. Wherever his mind wandered, it was too far from this place—or rather, this place was too small a part of his arena—for him to be claimed by any voices here, however desperate. She halted at the edge of the circle. Though there was nothing to suggest that what lay inside was in flux, she'd seen the harm done to both Dowd and his voider when the bounds had been in judiciously breached. From down below she heard Celestine raise a cry of warning. There was no time for equivocation. What the circle would do it would do, and she'd have to take the consequences.

Steeling herself, she stepped over the perimeter. Instantly, the myriad discomforts that attended passage afflicted her—itches, pangs, and spasms—and for a moment she thought the circle intended to dispatch her across the In Ovo. But the work it was about had overruled such functions, and the pains simply mounted and mounted, driving her to her knees in front of Gentle. Tears spilled from her knitted lids, and

the ripest curses from her lips. The circle hadn't killed her, but another minute of its persecutions and it might. She had to be quick.

She forced open her streaming eyes and set her gaze on Gentle. Shouts hadn't roused him, nor had curses, so she didn't waste her breath with more. Instead she seized his shoulders and began to shake him. His muscles were lax, and he lolled in her grasp, but either her touch or the fact of her trespass in this charmed circle won a response. He

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gaped as though he'd been drawn up from some airless deep.

Now she began to talk.

"Gentle? Gentle! Open your eyes! Gentle. I said, *Open* your fucking eyes!"

She was causing him pain, she knew. The tempo and volume of his gasps increased, and his face, which had been beatifically placid, was knotted with frowns and grimaces. She liked the sight. He'd been so smug in his messianic mode. Now there had to be an end to that complacency, and if it hurt a little it was his own damn fault for being too much his Father's child.

"Can you hear me?" she yelled at him. "You've got to stop the working. Gentle! You've got to stop it!"

His eyes started to flicker open.

"Good! Good!" she said, talking at his face like a school-marm trying to coax a delinquent pupil.

"You can do it! You can open your eyes. Go on! *Do it!* If you won't, I'll do it for you, I'm warning you!"

She was as good as her word, lifting her right hand to his left eye and thumbing back the lid. His eyeball was rolled back into its socket. Wherever he was, it was still a long way off, and she wasn't sure her body had the strength to resist its harrowment while she coaxed him home.

Then, from the landing behind her, Sartori's voice.

"It's too late, love," he said. "Can't you feel it? It's too late."

She didn't need to look back at him. She could picture him well enough, with the knives in his hands and elegy on his face. Nor did she reply. She needed every last ounce of will and wit to stir the man in front of her.

And then inspiration! Her hand went from his face to his groin, from his eyelid to his testicles. Surely there was enough of the old Gentle left in the Reconciler to value his manhood. The flesh of his scrotum was loose in the warmth of the room. His balls were heavy in her hand, heavy and vulnerable. She held them hard.

"Open your eyes," she said, "or so help me I'm going to hurt you."

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He remained impassive. She tightened her grip. "Wake up," she said.

Still nothing. She squeezed harder, then twisted. "Wake up!"

His breath quickened. She twisted again, and his eyes suddenly opened, his gasps becoming a yell which didn't stop until there was no breath left in his lungs to loose it on. As he inhaled his arms rose to take hold of Jude at the neck. She lost her grip on his balls, but it didn't matter. He was awake and raging. He started to rise and, as he did so, pitched her out of the circle. She landed clumsily, but began harassing him before she'd even raised her head.

"You've got to stop the working!"

"Crazy .,. woman ..." he growled.

"I mean it! You've got to stop the working! It's all a plot!" She hauled herself up. "Dowd was right, Gentle! It's got to be stopped,"

"You're not going to spoil it now," he said. "You're too late."

"Find a way!" she said. "There's got to be a way!"

"If you come near me again I'll kill you," he warned. He scanned the circle, to be certain it was still intact. It was. "Where's Clem?" he yelled. "*Clem?*"

Only now did he look beyond Judith to the door, and beyond the door to the shadowy figure on the landing. His frown deepened into a scowl of revulsion, and she knew any hope of persuading him was lost. He saw conspiracy here.

"There, love," said Sartori. "Didn't I tell you it was too late?"

The two gek-a-gek fawned at his feet. The knives gleamed in his fists. This time he didn't offer the handle of either one. He'd come to take her life if she refused to take her own.

"Dearest one," he said, "it's over."

He took a step and crossed the threshold.

"We can do it here," he said, looking down at her, "where we were made. What better place?"

She didn't need to look back at Gentle to know he was hearing this. Was there some sliver of hope in that fact?

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Some persuasion that might drop from Sartori's lips and move Gentle where hers had failed?

"I'm going to have to do it for us both, love," he said. "You're too weak. You can't see clearly."

"I don't... want... to die," she said.

"You don't have any choice," he said. "It's either by the Father or the Son. That's all. Father or Son."

Behind her, she heard Gentle murmur two syllables.

"Oh, Pie."

Then Sartori took a second step, out of the shadow into the candlelight. When he did, the obsessive scrutiny of the room fixed him in every wretched morsel. His eyes were wet with despair, his lips so dry they were dusty. His skull gleamed through his pallid skin, and his teeth, in their array, made a fatal smile. He was Death, in every detail. And if she recognized that fact—she who loved him—then so, surely, did Gentle.

He took a third step toward her and raised the knives above his head. She didn't look away, but turned her face up towards him, daring him to spoil with his blades what he'd caressed with his fingers only minutes before.

"I would have died for you," he murmured. The blades were at the top of their gleaming arc, ready to fall. "Why wouldn't you die for me?"

He didn't wait for an answer, even if she'd had one to give, but let the knives descend. As they came for her eyes she looked away, but before they caught her cheek and neck the Reconciler howled behind her, and the whole room shook. She was thrown from her knees, Sartori's blades missing her by inches. The candles on the mantel-piece guttered and went out, but there were other lights to take their place. The stones of the circle were flickering like tiny bonfires flattened by a high wind, flecks of their brightness racing from them to strike the walls. At the circle's edge stood Gentle. In his hand, the reason for this turmoil. He'd picked up one of the stones, arming himself and breaking the circle in the same moment. He clearly knew the gravity of his deed. There was grief on his face, so profound it seemed to have incapacitated him. Having raised

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the stone he was now motionless, as if his will to undo the working had already lost momentum.

She got to her feet, though the room was shaking more violently than ever. The boards felt solid enough beneath her, but they'd darkened to near invisibility. She could see only the nails that kept them in place; the rest, despite the light from the stones, was pitch black, and as she started to move towards the circle she seemed to be treading a void.

There was a noise accompanying every tremor now: a mingling of tortured wood and cracking plaster, all underscored by a guttural boiling, the source of which she didn't comprehend until she reached the edge of the circle. The darkness beneath them was indeed a void—the In Ovo, opened by Gentle's breaking of the circle—and in it, already woken by Sartori's dabblings, the prisoners that conived and suppurated there, rising at the scent of escape.

At the door, the gek-a-gek set up a clamor of anticipation, sensing the release of their fellows. But for all their power they'd have few of the spoils in the coming massacre. There were forms appearing below that made them look kittenish: entities of such elaboration neither Jude's eyes nor wits could encompass them. The sight terrified her, but if this was the only way to halt the Reconciliation, then so

be it. History would repeat itself, and the Maestro be twice damned.

He'd seen the Oviates' ascent as clearly as she and was frozen by the sight. Determined to prevent him from reestablishing the status quo at all costs, she reached to snatch the stone from his hand, so as to pitch it through the window. But before her fingers could grasp it he looked up at her. The anguish went from his face, and rage replaced it.

"Throw the stone away!" she yelled.

His eyes weren't on her, however. They were on a sight at her shoulder. Sartori! She threw herself aside as the knives came down and, clutching the mantelpiece, turned back to see the brothers face to face, one armed with blades, the other with the stone.

Sartori's glance had gone to Jude as she leapt, and before he could return it to his enemy Gentle brought the stone

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down with a two-handed blow, striking sparks from one of the blades as he dashed it from his brother's fingers. While the advantage was his, Gentle went after the second blade, but Sartori had it out of range before the stone could connect, so Gentle swung at the empty hand, the cracking of his brother's bones audible through the din of Oviates and boards and cracking walls.

Sartori made a pitiful yell and raised his fractured hand in front of his brother, as if to win remorse for the hurt. But as Gentle's eyes went to Sartori's broken hand, the other, whole and sharp, came at his flank. He glimpsed the blade and half turned to avoid it, but it found his arm, opening it to the bone from wrist to elbow. He dropped the stone, a rain of blood coming after, and as his palm went up to stem the flow Sartori entered the circle, slashing back and forth as he came.

Defenseless, Gentle retreated before the blade and, arching back to avoid the cuts, lost his footing and went down beneath his attacker. One stab would have finished him there and then. But Sartori wanted intimacy. He straddled his brother's body and squatted down upon it, slashing at Gentle's arms as he attempted to ward off the coup de grace.

Jude scoured the unsolid boards for the fallen knife, her gaze distracted by the malignant forms that were everywhere turning their faces to freedom. The blade, if she could find it, would be of no use against them, but it might still dispatch Sartori. He'd planned to take his own life with one of these knives. She could still turn it to such work, if she could only find it.

But before she could do so, she heard a sob from the circle and, glancing back, saw Gentle sprawled beneath his brother's weight, horrendously wounded, his chest sliced open, his jaw, cheeks, and temples slashed, his hands and arms crisscrossed with cuts. The sob wasn't his, but Sartori's. He'd raised the knife and was uttering this last cry before he plunged the blade into his brother's heart.

His grief was premature. As the knife came down, Gentle found the strength to thrash one final time, and instead

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of finding his heart the blade entered his upper chest below his clavicle. Slickened, the handle slipped through Sartori's fingers. But he had no need to reclaim it. Gentle's rally was over as suddenly as it had begun. His body uncurled, its spasms ceased, and he lay still.

Sartori rose from his seat on his brother's belly and looked down at the body for a time, then turned to survey the spectacle of the void. Though the Oviates were close to the surface now, he didn't hurry to act or retreat, but surveyed the whole panorama at the center of which he stood, his eyes finally coming to rest on Jude.

"Oh, love," he said softly. "Look what you've done. You've given me to my Heavenly Father."

Then he stooped and reached out of the circle to take hold of the stone that Gentle had removed and, with the finesse of a painter laying down a final stroke, put it back in place.

The status quo wasn't instantly restored. The forms below continued to rise, seething with frustration as they sensed that their route into the Fifth had been sealed. The fire in the stone began to go out, but before their last gutterings Sartori murmured an order to the gek-a-gek and they sloped from their places at the door, their flat heads skimming the ground. Jude thought at first they were coming for her, but it was Gentle they'd been ordered to collect. They divided around the circle and reached over its perimeter, taking hold of the body almost tenderly and lifting it out of their Maestro's way.

"Down the stairs," he told them, and they retreated to the door with their burden, leaving the circle in Sartori's sole possession.

A terrible calm had descended. The last glimpses of the In Ovo had disappeared; the light in the stones was all but gone. In the gathering darkness she saw Sartori find his place at the center of the circle and sit.

"Don't do this," she murmured to him.

He raised his head and made a little grunt, as though he was surprised she was still in the room.

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"It's already done," he said. "All I have to do is hold the circle till midnight."

She heard a moan from below, as Clem saw what the Oviates had brought to the top of the stairs. Then came the thump, thump, thump as the body was thrown down the flight. There could only be seconds before they came back for her, seconds to coax him from the circle. She knew only one way, and if it failed there could be no further appeal.

"I love you," she said.

It was too dark to see him, but she felt his eyes.

"I know," he said, without feeling. "But my Heavenly Father will love me more. It's in His hands now."

She heard the Oviates moving behind her, their breath chilly on her neck.

"I don't ever want to see you again," Sartori said.

"Please call them off," she begged him, remembering the way Clem had been apprehended by these beasts, his arm half-swallowed.

"Leave of your volition, and they won't touch you," he said. "I am about my Father's business."

"He doesn't love you...."

"Leave."

"He's incapable...."

"Leave,"

She got to her feet. There was nothing left to say or do. As she turned her back on the circle the Oviates pressed their cold flanks against her legs and kept her trapped between them until she reached the threshold, to be certain she made no last attempt on their summoner's life. Then she was allowed to go unescorted onto the landing. Clem was halfway up the stairs, bludgeon in hand, but she instructed him to stay where he was, fearful that the gek-a-gek would claw him to shreds if he climbed another step.

The door to the Meditation Room slammed behind her, and she glanced back to confirm what she'd already guessed: that the Oviates had followed her out and were now standing guard at the threshold. Still nervous that they'd land some last blow, she crossed to the top of the

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flight as though she were walking on eggs and only picked up her speed once she was on the stairs.

There was light below, but the scene it illuminated was as grim as anything above. Gentle was lying at the bottom of the stairs, his head laid on Celestine's lap. The sheet she'd worn had fallen from her shoulders, and her breasts were bare, bloodied where she'd held her son's face to her skin.

"Is he dead?" Jude murmured to Clem.

He shook his head. "He's holding on."

She didn't have to ask what for. The front door was open, hanging half-demolished from its hinges, and through it she could hear the first stroke of midnight from a distant steeple.

"The circle's complete," she said.

"What circle?" Clem asked her.

She didn't reply. What did it matter now? But Celestine had looked up from her meditation on Gentle's face, and the same question was in her eyes as on Clem's lips, so Jude answered them as plainly as she could.

"The Imajica's a circle," she said.

"How do you know?" Clem asked.

"The Goddesses told me."

She was almost at the bottom of the stairs, and now that she was closer to mother and son she could see that Gentle was literally holding on to life, clutching at Celestine's arm and staring up into her face. Only when Jude sank down onto the bottom stair did Gentle's eyes go to her.

"I...never knew," he said.

"I know," she replied, thinking he was speaking of Hapexamendios' plot. "I didn't want to believe it either."

Gentle shook his head. "I mean the circle," he said. "I never knew it was a circle...."

"It was the Goddesses' secret," Jude said.

Now Celestine spoke, her voice as soft as the flames that lit her lips. "Doesn't Hapexamendios know?"

Jude shook her head.

"So whatever fire he sends," Celestine murmured, "will burn its way around the circle."

Jude studied her face, knowing there was some profit in

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this knowledge but too exhausted to make sense of it. Celestine looked down at Gentle's face.

"Child?" she said.

"Yes, Mama."

"Go to Him," she said. "Take your spirit into the First and find your Father."

The effort of breathing seemed almost too much for Gentle, never mind a journey. But what his body was incapable of, maybe his spirit could achieve. He lifted his finger towards his mother's face. She caught hold of them.

"What are you going to do?" Gentle said.

"Call His fire," Celestine said.

Jude looked towards Clem to see if this exchange made any more sense to him than it did to her, but he looked completely perplexed. What was the use of inviting death when it was going to come anyway, and all too quickly?

"Delay Him," Celestine was telling Gentle. "Go to Him as a loving son, and hold His attention for as long as you can. Flatter Him. Tell Him how much you want to see His face. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course, Mama."

"Good."

Content that her child would do as he was charged, Celestine laid Gentle's hand back upon his chest, and slid her knees out from beneath his head, lowering it tenderly to the boards. She had one last instruction for him.

"When you go into the First, go through the Dominions. He mustn't know that there's another way, do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

"And when you get there, child, listen for the voice. It's in the ground. You'll hear it, if you listen carefully. It says—"

"Nisi Nirvana."

"That's right."

"I remember," Gentle said. "Nisi Nirvana."

As if the name were a blessing and would protect him as he went on his way, he closed his eyes and took his leave.

Celestine didn't indulge in sentiment but rose, pulling

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the sheet up around her as she crossed to the bottom of the stairs. "Now I have to speak to Sartori."

"That's going to be difficult," Jude said. "The door's locked and guarded."

"He's my son," Celestine replied, looking up the flight. "He'll open it for me."

And so saying, she ascended.

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Gentle's spirit went from the house, thinking not of the Father that awaited him in the First Dominion but of the mother he was leaving behind. In the hours since his return from the Tabula Rasa's tower they'd shared all too brief a time together. He'd knelt beside her bed for a few minutes while she told the story of Nisi Nirvana. He'd held on to her in the Goddesses' rain, ashamed of the desire he felt but unable to deny it. And finally, moments ago, he'd lain in her arms while the blood seeped out of him. Child; lover; cauldron. There was the arc of a little life there, and they'd have to be content with it.

He didn't entirely comprehend her purpose in sending him from her, but he was too confounded to do anything but obey. She had her reasons, and he had to trust them, now that the work he'd labored to achieve had soured. That too he didn't entirely comprehend. It had happened too fast. One moment he'd been so remote from his body he was almost ready to forget it entirely; the next he was back in the Meditation Room, with Jude's grip earning his screams, and his brother mounting the stairs behind her, his knives gleaming. He'd known then, seeing death in his brother's face, why the mystic had torn itself to

shreds in order to make him seek Sartori out. Their Father was there in that face, in that despairing certainty, and had been all along, no doubt. But he'd never seen it. All he'd ever seen was his

own beauty, twisted out of true, and told himself how fine it was to be Heaven to his other's Hell. What a mockery that was! He'd been his Father's dupe—His agent, His fool—and he might never have realized it if Jude hadn't dragged him raw from the Ana and showed him in terrible particulars the destroyer in the mirror.

But the recognition had come so late, and he was so illequipped to undo the damage he'd done. He could only hope that his mother understood better than he where the little hope left to them lay. In pursuit of it, he'd be *her* agent now and go into the First to do whatever he could at her behest.

He went the long way round, as she'd instructed, his path taking him back over the territories he'd traveled when he'd sought out the Synod, and though he longed to swoop out of the air and pass the time of a new day with the others, he knew he couldn't linger.

He glimpsed them as he went, however, and saw that they'd survived the last hectic minutes in the Ana and were back in their Dominions, beaming with their triumph. On the Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw was howling to the heavens like a lunatic, waking every sleeper in Vanaeph and stirring the guards in the watchtowers of Patashoqua. In the Kwem, Scopique was clambering up the slope of the Pivotpit where he'd sat to do his part, tears of joy in his eyes as he returned them skyward. In Yzordderrex, Athanasius was on his knees in the street outside the Eurhetemec Kesparate, bathing his hands in a spring that was leaping up at his wounded face like a dog that wanted to lick him well. And on the borders of the First, where Gentle's spirit slowed, Chicka Jackeen was watching the Erasure, waiting for the blank wall to dissolve and give him a glimpse of Hapexa-mendios' Dominion.

His gaze left the sight, however, when he felt Gentle's presence. "Maestro?" he said.

More than any of the others, Gentle wanted to share something of what was afoot with Jackeen, but he dared not. Any exchange this close to the Erasure might be moni-

tored by the God behind it, and he knew he'd not be able to converse with this man, who'd shown him such devotion, without offering some word of warning, so he didn't tempt himself. Instead he commanded his spirit on, hearing Jack-eeen call his name again as he went. But before the appeal could come a third time he passed through the Erasure and into the Dominion beyond. In the blind moments before the First appeared, his mother's voice echoed in his head.

"She went into a city of iniquities," he heard her saying, "where no ghost was holy, and no flesh was whole."

Then the Erasure was behind him, and he was hovering on the perimeters of the City of God.

No wonder his brother had been an architect, he thought. Here was enough inspiration for a nation of prodigies, a labor of ages, raised by a power for whom an age was the measure of a breath. Its majesty spread in every direction but the one behind, the streets wider than the Pata-shoquan Highway and so straight they only disappeared at their vanishing point, the buildings so monumental the sky was barely

visible between their eaves. But whatever sun or satellites hung in the heavens of this Dominion, the city had no need of their illumination. Cords of light ran through the paving stones, and through the bricks and slabs of the great houses, their ubiquity ensuring that all but the most vapid shadows were banished from the streets and plazas.

He moved slowly at first, expecting soon to encounter one of the city's inhabitants, but after passing over half a dozen intersections and finding no soul on the streets, he began to pick up his speed, slowing only when he glimpsed some sign of life behind the facades. He wasn't nimble enough to catch a face, nor was he so presumptuous as to enter uninvited, but he several times saw curtains moving, as though some shy but curious citizen was retiring from the sill before he could return the scrutiny. Nor was this the only sign of such presences. Carpets left hanging over balconies still shook, as if their beaters had just retired from their patios; vines dropped their leaves down as fruit gatherers fled for the safety of their rooms.

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It seemed that however fast he traveled—and he was moving faster than any vehicle—he couldn't overtake the rumor that drove the populace into hiding. They left nothing behind: no pet, no child, no scrap of litter, no stroke of graffiti. Each was a model citizen and kept his or her life out of sight behind the drapes and the closed doors.

Such emptiness in a metropolis so clearly built to teem might have seemed melancholy had it not been for the structures themselves, which were built of materials so diverse in texture and color, and were lent such vitality by the light that ran in them, that, even though they were deserted, the streets and plazas had a life of their own. The builders had banished gray and brown from their palette and in its place had found slate, stone, paving, and tiles of every conceivable hue and nuance, mingling their colors with an audacity no architect of the Fifth would have dared. Street after street presented a spectacle of glorious color: facades of lilac and amber, colonnades of brilliant purples, squares laid out in ochre and blue. And everywhere, amid the riot, scarlet of eye-pricking intensity; and a white as perfect; and here and there, used more sparingly still, flicks and snippets of black: a tile, a brick, a seam in a slab.

But even such beauty could pall, and after a thousand such streets had slipped by—all as heroically built, all as lushly colored—the sheer excess of it became sickening, and Gentle was glad of the lightning that he saw erupt from one of the nearby streets, its brilliance sufficient to bleach the color from the facades for a flickering time. In search of its source, he redirected himself and came into a square, at the center of which stood a solitary figure, a Nullianac, its head thrown back as it unleashed its silent bolts into the barely glimpsed sky. Its power was many orders of magnitude greater than anything Gentle had witnessed from its like before. It, and presumably its brothers, had a piece of the God's power between the palms of its face, and its capacity for destruction was now stupendous.

Sensing the approach of the wanderer, the creature left off its rehearsals and floated up from the square as it searched for this interloper. Gentle didn't know what harm

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it could do to him in his present condition. If the Nullianacs were now Hapexamendios' elite, who knew what authority they'd been lent? But there was no profit in retreat. If he didn't seek some direction, he might wander here forever and never find his Father.

The Nullianac was naked, but there was neither sensuality nor vulnerability in that state. Its flesh was almost as bright as its fire, its form without visible means of procreation or evacuation: without hair,

without nipples, without navel. It turned and turned and turned again, looking for the entity whose nearness it sensed, but perhaps the new scale of its destructive powers had made it insensitive, because it failed to find Gentle until his spirit hovered a few yards away.

"Are you looking for me?" he said.

It found him now. Arcs of energy played back and forth between the palms of its head, and out of their crackling the creature's unmelodious voice emerged.

"Maestro," it said.

"You know who I am?"

"Of course," it said. "Of course."

Its head wove like that of a mesmerized snake as it drew closer to Gentle.

"Why are you here?" it said.

"To see my Father."

"Ah."

"I came here to honor Him."

"So do we all."

"I'm sure. Can you take me to Him?"

"He's everywhere," the Nullianac said. "This is His city, and He's in its every mote."

"So if I speak to the ground I speak to Him, do I?"

The Nullianac mused on this for a few moments. "Not the ground," it said. "Don't speak to the ground."

"Then what? The walls? The sky? *You*? Is my Father in you?"

The arcs in the Nullianac's head grew more excitable. "No," it said. "I wouldn't presume—"

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"Then will you take me to where I *can* do Him devotion? There isn't much time."

It was this remark more than any other which gained the Nullianac's compliance. It nodded its death-laden head.

"I'll take you," it said, and rose a little higher, turning from Gentle as it did so. "But as you say, we must be swift. His business cannot wait long."

Though Jude had been loath to let Celestine climb the stairs above, knowing as she did what lay at the top, she also knew that her presence would only spoil what little chance the woman had of gaining access to the Meditation Room, so she reluctantly stayed below, listening hard—as did they all—for some clue to what was transpiring in the shadows of the landing.

The first sound they heard was the warning growls of the gek-a-gek, followed by Sartori's voice, telling trespassers that their lives would be forfeit if they attempted to enter. Celestine answered him, but in a voice so low the sense of what she said was lost before it reached the bottom of the flight, and as the minutes passed—were they minutes? perhaps only dreadful seconds, waiting for another eruption of violence—Jude could resist the temptation no longer and, snuffing out the candles closest to her, started a slow ascent.

She expected the angels to make some move to stop her, but they were too preoccupied with tending to Gentle's body, and she climbed unhindered by all but her caution. Celestine was still outside the door, she saw, but the Oviates were no longer blocking her way. At the instruction of the man inside they'd shrunk away and were waiting, bellies to the ground, for a cue to do mischief. Jude was now almost halfway up the flight, and she was able to catch fragments of the exchange that was under way between mother and son. It was Sartori's voice she heard first; a wasted whisper.

"It's over, Mama...."

"I know, child," Celestine said. There was conciliation in her tone, not rebuke.

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"He's going to kill everything...."

"Yes. I know that too."

"I had to hold the circle for Him . . . it's what He wanted."

"And you had to do what He wanted. I understand that, child. Believe me, I do. I served Him too, remember? It's no great crime."

At these words of forgiveness, the door of the Meditation Room clicked open and slowly swung wide. Jude was too far down the staircase to see more than the rafters, lit either by a candle or the halo of Oviatic tissue that had attended on Sartori when he was out in the street. With the door open, his voice was much clearer.

"Will you come in?" he asked Celestine.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes, Mama. Please. I'd like us to be together when the end comes."

A familiar sentiment, Jude thought. Apparently he didn't much care what breast he laid his sobbing head on, as long as he wasn't left to die alone. Celestine put up no further show of ambivalence but accepted her child's invitation and stepped inside. The door didn't close, nor did the gek-a-gek creep back into place to block it. Celestine was quickly gone from sight, however. Jude was sorely tempted to continue her ascent and watch what unfolded inside, but she was afraid that any further advance would be sensed

by the Oviates, so she gingerly sat down on the stairs, halfway between the Maestro at the top and the body at the bottom. There she waited, listening to the silence of the house; of the street; of the world.

In her mind, she shaped a prayer.

Goddess, she thought, *this is Your sister, Judith. There's a fire coming, Goddess. It's almost upon me, and I'm afraid.*

From above, she heard Sartori speak, his voice now so low she could catch none of his words even with the door open. But she heard the tears that they became, and the sound broke her concentration. The thread of her prayer

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was lost. No matter. She'd said enough to summarize her feelings.

The fire's almost upon me, Goddess. I am afraid.

What was there left to say?

3

The speed at which Gentle and the Nullianac traveled didn't diminish the scale of the city they were passing through: quite the opposite. As the minutes passed, and the streets continued to flicker by, thousand upon thousand, their buildings all raised from the same ripely colored stone, all built to obscure the sky, all laid to the horizon, the magnitude of this labor began to seem not epic but insane. However alluring its colors were, however satisfying its geometries and exquisite its details, the city was the work of a collective madness: a compulsive vision that had refused to be placated until it had covered every inch of the Dominion with monuments to its own relentlessness. Nor was there any sign of any life on any street, leading Gentle to a suspicion that he finally voiced, not as a statement but as a question.

"Who lives here?" he said.

"Hapexamendios."

"And who else?"

"It's His city," the Nullianac said,

"Are there no citizens?"

"It's His city."

The answer was plain enough: the place was deserted. The shaking of vines and drapes he'd seen when he'd first arrived had either been caused by his approach or, more likely, been a game of illusion the empty buildings had devised to while away the centuries.

But at last, after traveling through innumerable streets that were indistinguishable from each other, there were finally subtle signs of change in the structures ahead. Their luscious colors were steadily deepening, the stone soddened it must soon surely ooze and run. And there was a new elaboration in the facades,

and a perfection in their

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proportions, that made Gentle think that he and the Nulh'ianac were approaching the First Cause, the district of which the streets they'd passed through had been imitations, diluted by repetition.

Confirming his suspicion that the journey was nearing its end, Gentle's guide spoke.

"He knew you'd come," it said. "He sent some of my brothers to the perimeter to look for you."

"Are there many of you?"

"Many," the Nulh'ianac said. "Minus one." It looked in Gentle's direction, "But you know this, of course. You killed him."

"He would have killed *me* if I hadn't."

"And wouldn't that have been a proud boast for our tribe," it said, "to have killed the Son of God?"

It made a laugh from its lightning, though there was more humor in a death rattle.

"Aren't you afraid?" Gentle asked it,

"Why should I be afraid?"

"Talking this way when my Father may hear you?"

"He needs my service," came the reply. "And I do not need to live." It paused, then said, "Though I would miss burning the Dominions."

Now it was Gentle's turn to ask why.

"Because it's what I was born to do. I've lived too long, waiting for this."

"How long?"

"Many thousands of years, Maestro. Many, many thousands."

It silenced Gentle, to think that he was traveling beside an entity whose span was so much vaster than his own, and anticipated this imminent destruction as its life's reward. How far off was that prize? he wondered. His sense of time was impoverished without the tick of breath and heartbeat to aid it, and he had no clue as to whether he'd vacated his body in Gamut Street two minutes before, or five, or ten. It was in truth academic. With the Dominions reconciled, Hapexamendios could choose His moment, and Gentle's only comfort was the continued presence of his guide, who

would be, he suspected, gone from his side at the first call to arms.

As the street ahead grew denser, the Nullianac's speed and height dropped, until they were hovering inches above the ground, the buildings around them grotesquely elaborate now, every fraction of their brick and stonework etched and carved and filigreed. There was no beauty in these intricacies, only obsession. Their surfeit was more morbid than lively, like the ceaseless, witless motion of maggots. And the same decadence had overcome the colors, the delicacy and profusion of which he'd so admired in the suburbs. Their nuances were gone. Every color now competed with scarlet, the mingled show not brightening the air but bruising it. Nor was there light here in the same abundance as there'd been at the outskirts of the city. Though seams of brightness still flickered in the stone, the elaboration that surrounded them devoured their glow and left these depths dismal.

"I can go no farther than this, Reconciler," the Nullianac said. "From here, you go alone."

"Shall I tell my Father who found me?" Gentle said, hoping that the offer might coax a few more tidbits from the creature before he came into Hapexamendios' presence.

"I have no name," the Nullianac replied. "I am my brother and my brother is me."

"I see. That's a pity."

"But you offered me a kindness, Reconciler. Let me offer you one."

"Yes?"

"Name me a place to destroy in your name, and I'll make it my business to do so: a city, a country, whatever."

"Why would I want that?" Gentle said.

"Because you're your Father's son," came the reply. "And what your Father wants, so will you."

Despite all his caution, Gentle couldn't help but give the destroyer a sour look.

"No?" it said.

"No."

"Then we're both without gifts to give," it said and, turn-

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ing its back, rose and went from Gentle without another word.

He didn't call after it for directions. There was only one way to go now, and that was on, into the heart of the metropolis, choked though it was by gaud and elaboration. He had the power to go at the speed of thought, of course, but he wished to do nothing that might alarm the Unbeheld, so took his spirit into the garish gloom like a pedestrian, wandering between edifices so fraught with ornament they

could not be far from collapse.

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As the splendors of the suburbs had given way to decadence, so decadence had, in its turn, given way to pathology, a state that drove his sensibilities beyond distaste or antipathy to the borders of panic. That mere excess might squeeze such anguish out of him was revelation in itself. When had he become so rarefied? He, the crass copyist. He, the sybarite who'd never said *enough*, much less *too much*. What had he become? A phantom aesthete driven to terror by the sight of his Father's city.

Of the Architect Himself, there was no sign, and rather than advance into complete darkness Gentle stopped and simply said, "Father?"

Though his voice had very little authority here, it was loud in such utter silence, and must surely have gone to every threshold within the radius of a dozen streets. But if Hapexamendios was in residence behind any of these doors, He made no reply.

Gentle tried again. "Father. I want to see you."

As he spoke he peered down the shadowy street ahead, looking for some sign, however vestigial, of the Unbeheld's whereabouts. There was no murmur, no motion. But his study was rewarded by the slow comprehension that his Father, for all His apparent absence, was in fact here in front of him and to his left, and to his right, and above his head, and beneath his feet. What were those gleaming folds at the windows, if they weren't skin? What were those arches, if they weren't bone? What was this scarlet pavement, and this light-shot stone, if it wasn't flesh? There was pith and marrow here. There was tooth and lash and nail. The Nul-

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lianac hadn't been speaking of spirit when it had said that

Hapexamendios was everywhere in this metropolis. This

was the City of God; and God was the city.

Twice in his life he'd had presentiments of this revelation. The first time when he'd entered Yzordderrex, which had been commonly called a city-god itself and had been, he

now understood, his brother's unwitting attempt to re-

create his Father's masterwork. The second when he'd un-

dertaken the business of similitudes and had realized, as thenet of his ambition encompassed London, that there was no part of it, from sewer to dome, that was not somehow analogous to his anatomy.

Here was that theory proved. The knowledge didn't strengthen him but, instead, fueled the dread he felt, thinking of his Father's immensity. He'd crossed a continent and more to get here, and there'd been no part of it that was not made as these streets were made, his Father's substance replicated in unimaginable

quantities to become the raw materials for the masons and carpenters and hod carriers of His will. And yet, for all its magnitude, what was His city? A trap of corporeality, and its architect its prisoner.

"Oh, Father," he said, and perhaps because the formality had gone from his voice, and there was sorrow in it, he was finally granted a reply.

"You've done well for me," the voice said.

Gentle remembered its monotony well. Here was the same barely discernible modulation he'd first heard as he'd stood in the shadow of the Pivot.

"You've succeeded where all the others failed," Hapexa-mendios said. *"They went astray or let themselves be crucified. But you, Reconciler, you held to your course."* "For your sake, Father."

"And that service has earned you a place here," the God said. *"In my city. In my heart."*

"Thank you," Gentle replied, fearful that this gift was going to mark the end of the exchange.

If so, he'd have failed as his mother's agent. Tell Him you want to see His face, she'd said. Distract Him. Flatter Him. Ah, yes, flattery!

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"I want to learn from You now, Father," he said. "I want to be able to carry Your wisdom back into the Fifth with me."

"You've done all you need to do, Reconciler," Hapexa-mendios said. *"You won't need to go back into the Fifth, for your sake or mine. You'll stay with me and watch my work."*

"What work is that?"

"You know what work," came the God's reply. *"I heard you speak with the Nullianac, Why are you pretending ignorance?"*

The inflexions in His voice were too subtle to be interpreted. Was there genuine inquiry in the question, or a fury at His son's deceit?

"I didn't wish to presume, Father," Gentle said, cursing himself for this gaffe. "I thought You'd want to tell me

Yourself."

"Why would I tell you what you already know?" the God said, unwilling to be persuaded from this argument until He had a convincing answer. *"You already have every knowledge you need —"*

"Not every one," Gentle said, seeing now how he might divert the flow.

"What do you lack?" Hapexamendios said. "I tell you everything."

"Your face, Father."

"My face? What about my face?"

"That's what I lack. The sight of Your face."

"You've seen my city," the Unbeheld replied. "That's my face."

"There's no other? Really, Father? None?"

"Aren't you content with that?" Hapexamendios said. "Isn't it perfect enough? Doesn't it shine?"

"Too much, Father. It's too glorious."

"How can a thing be too glorious?"

"Part of me's human, Father, and that part's weak. I look at this city, and I'm agog. It's a masterwork—"

"Yes, it is."

"Genius."

"Yes, it is."

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"But Father, grant me a simpler sight. Show a glimpse of the face that made my face, so that I can know the part of me that's You."

He heard something very like a sigh in the air around him.

"It may seem ridiculous to you," Gentle said, "but I've followed this course because I wanted to see one face. One loving face." There was enough truth in this to lend his words real passion. There was indeed a face he'd hoped to find at the end of his journey. "Is it too much to ask?" he said.

There was a flutter of movement in the dingy arena ahead, and Gentle stared into the murk, in the expectation

of some colossal door opening. But instead Hapexamendios said, "Turn your back, Reconciler."

"You want me to leave?"

"No. Only avert your eyes."

Here was a paradox: to be told to look away when sight was requested. But there was something other than an un-veiling afoot. For the first time since entering the Domin-

ion, he heard sounds other than a voice: a delicate rustling, a muted patter, creaks and whirrings stealing on his ear. And all around him, tiny motions in the solid street, as the monoliths softened and inclined towards the mystery he'd turned his back upon. A step gaped and oozed marrow. A wall opened where stone met stone, and a scarlet deeper

than any he'd seen, a scarlet turned almost black, ran in rills as the slabs yielded up their geometry, lending themselves

to the Unbeheld's purpose. Teeth came down from an unk-nitted balcony above, and loops of gut unraveled from the

sills, dragging down curtains of tissue as they came.

As the deconstruction escalated, he dared the look he'd

been forbidden, glancing back to see the entire street in

ross or petty motion: forms fracturing, forms congealing, forms drooping and rising. There was nothing recognizable in the turmoil, and Gentle was about to turn away when one

of the pliant walls tumbled in the flux and for a heartbeat,

no more, he glimpsed a figure behind it. The moment was

long enough to know the face he saw and have it in his

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mind's eye when he looked away. There was no face it equal in the Imajica. For all the sorrow on it, for all its wounds, it was exquisite.

Pie was alive and waiting there, in his Father's midst, a prisoner of the prisoner. It was all Gentle could do not to turn there and then and pitch his spirit into the tumult, demanding that his Father give the mystif up. This was his teacher, he'd say, his renewer, his perfect friend. But he fought the desire, knowing such an attempt would end in calamity, and instead turned away again, doting on the glimpse he'd had while the street behind him continued to convulse. Though the mystif's body had been marked by the hurts it had suffered, it was more whole than Gentle had dared hope. Perhaps it had drawn strength from the land on which Hapexamendios' city was built, the Dominion its people had worked their feits upon, before God had come to raise this metropolis.

But how should he persuade his Father to give the mystif up? With pleas? With further flattery? As he chewed on the problem, the ructions around him began to subside, and he heard Hapexamendios speak behind him.

"Reconciler?"

"Yes, Father?"

"You wanted to see my face."

"Yes, Father?"

"Turn and look."

He did so. The street in front of him had not lost all semblance of a thoroughfare. The buildings still stood, their doors and windows visible. But their architect had claimed from their substance sufficient pieces of the body he'd once owned to re-create it for Gentle's edification. The Father was human, of course, and had perhaps been no larger than His son in His first incarnation. But He'd remade Himself three times Gentle's height and more, a teetering giant that was as much borne up by the street He'd racked for matter as of it.

For all His scale, however, His form was ineptly made, as if He'd forgotten what it was like to be whole. His head was enormous, the shards of a thousand skulls claimed from the

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buildings to construct it, but so mismatched that the mind it was meant to shield was visible between the pieces, pulsing and flickering. One of His arms was vast, yet ended in a hand scarcely larger than Gentle's, while the other was wizened, but finished with fingers that had three dozen joints. His torso was another mass of misalliances, His innards cavorting in a cage of half a thousand ribs, His huge heart beating against a breastbone too weak, to contain it and already fractured. And below, at His groin, the strangest deformation: a sex He'd failed to conjure into a single organ, but which hung in rags, raw and useless. "Now," the God said. "Do you see?" The impassivity had gone from His voice, its monotony replaced by an assembly of voices, as many larynxes, none of them whole, labored to produce each word.

"Do you see," He said again, "*the resemblance?*"

Gentle stared at the abomination before him and, for all its patchworks and disunions, knew that he did. It wasn't in the limbs, this likeness, or in the torso, or in the sex. But it was there. When the vast head was raised, he saw his face in the ruin that clung to his Father's skull. A reflection of a reflection of a reflection, perhaps, and all in cracked mirrors. But oh! it was there. The sight distressed him beyond measure, not because he saw the kinship but because their roles seemed suddenly reversed. Despite its size, it was a

child he saw, its head fetal, its limbs untutored. It was eons old, but unable to slough off the fact of flesh, while he, for all his naivetes, had made his peace with that disposal.

"Have you seen enough, Reconciler?" Hapexamendios

said.

"Not quite." "What then?"

Gentle knew he had to speak now, before the likeness was undone again and the walls were resealed. "I want what's in You, Father." *"In me?"*

"Your prisoner, Father. I want Your prisoner." *"I have no prisoner."*

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"I'm your son," Gentle said. "The flesh of your flesh. Why do you lie to me?"

The unwieldy head shuddered. The heart beat hard against the broken bone.

"Is there something you don't want me to know?" Gentle said, starting towards the wretched body. "You told me I could know everything."

The hands, great and small, twitched and jittered.

"Everything, You said, because I've done You perfect service. But there's something You don't want me to know."

"There's nothing."

"Then let me see the mystif. Let me see Pie 'oh' pah."

At this the God's body shook, and so did the walls around it. There were eruptions of light from beneath the flawed mosaic of His skull: little raging thoughts that cremated the air between the folds of His brain. The sight was a reminder to Gentle that, however frail this figure looked, it was the tiniest part of Hapexamendios' true scale. He was a city the size of a world, and if the power that had raised that city, and sustained the bright blood in its stone, was ever allowed to turn to destruction, it would beggar the Nul-lianacs.

Gentle's advance, which had so far been steady, was now halted. Though he was a spirit here and had thought no barrier could be raised against him, there was one before him now, thickening the air. Despite it, and the dread he felt when reminded of his Father's powers, he didn't retreat. He knew that if he did so the exchange would be over and Hapexamendios would be about His final business, His prisoner unreleased.

"Where's the pure, obedient son I had?" the God said. :

"Still here," Gentle replied. "Still wanting to serve You, if You'll deal with me honorably."

A series of more livid bursts erupted in the distended skull. This time, however, they broke from its dome and rose into the dark air above the God's head. There were images in these energies, fragments of Hapexamendios' thoughts, shaped from fire. One of them was Pie.

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"You've no business with the mystic," Hapexamendios said. *"It belongs to me."*

"No, Father."

"To me."

"I married it, Father."

The lightning was quieted momentarily, and the God's pulpy eyes narrowed.

"It made me remember my purpose," Gentle said. "It made me remember to be a Reconciler. I wouldn't be here—I wouldn't have served you—if it weren't for Pie 'oh'pah."

"Maybe it loved you once," the many throats replied. "But now I want you to forget it. Put it out of your head forever."

"Why?"

In reply came the parent's eternal answer to a child who asks too many questions. *"Because I tell you to,"* the God said.

But Gentle wouldn't be hushed so readily. He pressed on. "What does it know, Father?"

"Nothing."

"Does it know where Nisi Nirvana comes from? Is that what it knows?"

The fire in the Unbeheld's skull seethed at this. *"Who told you that?"* He raged.

There was no purpose served by lying, Gentle thought. "My mother," he said.

Every motion in the God's bloated body ceased, even its cage-battering heart. Only the lightning went on, and the next word came not from the mingled throats but from the fire itself. Three syllables, spoken in a lethal voice.

"Cel. Est. Ine."

"Yes, Father."

"She's dead," the lightning said.

"No, Father. I was in her arms a few minutes ago." He lifted his hand, translucent though it was. "She held these fingers. She kissed them. And she told me—"

"/ don't want to hear!"

"—to remind You—"

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"Where is she?"

"—of Nisi Nirvana."

"Where is she? Where? Where?"

He had been motionless, but now rose up in His fury, lift?ing His wretched limbs above His head as if to bathe them in His own lightning.

"Where is she?" he yelled, throats and fire making the demand together. *"I want to see her! I want to see her!"*

4

On the stairs below the Meditation Room, Jude stood up. The gek-a-gek had begun a guttural complaint that was, in its way, more distressing than any sound she'd ever heard from them. They were afraid. She saw them sloping away from their places beside the door like dogs in fear of a beat?ing, their spines depressed, their heads flattened.

She glanced at the company below: the angels still kneel?ing beside their wounded Maestro; Monday and Hoi-Pollo leaving off their vigil at the step and coming back into the candlelight, as though its little ring could preserve them from whatever power was agitating the air.

"Oh, Mama," she heard Sartori whisper.

"Yes, child?"

"He's looking for us, Mama."

"I know."

"You can feel it?"

"Yes, child, I can."

"Will you hold me, Mama? Will you hold me?"

"Where? Where?" the God was howling, and in the arcs above His skull shreds of His mind's sight appeared.

Here was a river, serpentine; and a city, drabber than His metropolis but all the finer for that; and a certain street; and a certain house. Gentle saw the eye Monday had scrawled on the front door, its pupil beaten out by the Oviates' at?ack. He saw his own body, with Clem beside it; and the stairs; and Jude on the stairs, climbing.

And then the room at the top, and the circle in the room,

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with his brother sitting inside it, and his mother, kneeling at the perimeter.

"Cel Est. Ine," the God said. "*Cel Est. Ine!*"

It wasn't Sartori's voice that uttered these syllables, but it was his Hps that moved to shape them. Jude was at the top of the stairs now, and she could see his face clearly. It was still wet with tears, but there was no expression upon it whatsoever. She'd never seen features so devoid of feeling. He was a vessel, filling up with another soul.

"Child?" Celestine said.

"Get away from him," Jude murmured.

Celestine started to rise. "You sound sick, child," she said.

The voice came again, this time a furious denial. "*I Am Not. A. Child.*"

"You wanted me to comfort you," Celestine said. "Let me do that."

Sartori's eyes looked up, but it wasn't his sight alone that fixed on her.

"Keep. Away," he said.

"I want to hold you," Celestine said, and instead of retreating she stepped over the boundary of the circle.

On the landing the gek-a-gek were in terror now, their retreat become a dance of panic. They beat their heads against the wall as if to hammer out their brains rather than hear the voice issuing from Sartori; this desperate, monstrous voice that said over and over, "*Keep. Away. Keep. Away.*"

-But Celestine wouldn't be denied. She knelt down again, in front of Sartori. When she spoke, however, it wasn't to the child, it was to the Father, to the God who'd taken her into this city of iniquities.

"Let me touch You, love," she said. "Let me touch You, the way You touched me."

"No!" Hapexamendios howled, but His child's limbs refused to rise and ward off the embrace.

The denial came again and again, but Celestine ignored

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it, her arms encircling them both, flesh and occupying spirit in one embrace.

This time, when the God unleashed His rejection, it was no longer a word but a sound, as pitiful as it was terrifying.

In the First, Gentle saw the lightning above his Father's head congeal into a single blinding flame and go from Him, like a meteor.

In the Second, Chicka Jackeen saw the blaze brighten the Erasure and fell to his knees on the flinty ground. A signal fire was coming, he thought, to announce the moment of victory.

In Yzordderrex, the Goddesses knew better. As the fire broke from the Erasure and entered the Second Dominion, the waters around the temple grew quiescent, so as not to draw death down upon them. Every child was hushed, every pool and rivulet stilled. But the fire's malice wasn't meant for them, and the meteor passed over the city, leaving it unharmed, outblazing the comet as it went.

With the fire out of sight, Gentle turned back to his Father.

"What have You done?" he demanded.

The God's attention lingered in the Fifth for a little time, but as Gentle's demand came again He withdrew His mind from His target, and His eyes regained their animation.

"I've sent a fire for the whore," He said. It was no longer the lightning that spoke, but His many throats.

"Why?"

"Because she tainted you... she made you want love."

"Is that so bad?"

"You can't build cities with love," the God said. "You can't make great works. It's weakness."

"And what about Nisi Nirvana?" Gentle said. "Is that a weakness too?"

He dropped to his knees and laid his phantom palms on the ground. They had no power here, or else he'd have started digging. Nor could his spirit pierce the ground. The same barrier that sealed him from his Father's belly kept him from looking into His Dominion's underworld. But he could ask the questions.

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"Who spoke the words, Father?" he asked. "Who said: Nisi Nirvana?"

"Forget you ever heard those words," Hapexamendios replied. "The whore is dead. It's over."

In his frustration Gentle made fists of his hands and beat on the solid ground.

"There's nothing there but Me," the many throats went on. "My flesh is everywhere. My flesh is the world, and the world is My flesh."

On the Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw had given up his triumphal jig and was sitting at the edge of his circle, waiting for the curious to emerge from their houses and come up to question him, when the fire appeared in the Fourth- Like Chicka Jackeen, he assumed it was some star of announcement, sent to mark the victory, and he rose again to hail it. He wasn't alone. There were several people below who'd

spotted the blaze over the Jokalaylau and were applauding the spectacle as it approached. When it passed overhead it brought a brief noon to Vanaeph, before going on its way. It lit Patashoqua just as brightly, then flew out of the Dominion through a fog that had just appeared beyond the city, marking the first passing place between the Dominion of green-gold skies and that of blue.

Two similar fogs had formed in Clerkenwell, one to the southeast of Gamut Street and the other to the northwest, both marking doorways in the newly reconciled Dominion. It was the latter that became blinding now, as the fire sped through it from the Fourth. The sight was not unwitnessed. Several revenants were in the vicinity, and though they had no clue as to what this signified, they sensed some calamity and retreated before the radiance, returning to the house to raise the alarm. But they were too sluggish. Before they were halfway back to Gamut Street the fog divided, and the Unbeheld's fire appeared in the benighted streets of Clerkenwell.

Monday saw it first, as he forsook the little comfort of the candlelight and returned to the step. The remnants of

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Sartori's hordes were raising a cacophony in the darkness outside, but even as he crossed the threshold to ward them off, the darkness became light.

From her place on the top stair Jude saw Celestine lay her lips against her son's and then, with astonishing strength, lift his dead weight up and pitch him out of the circle. Either the impact or the coming fire stirred him, and he began to rise, turning back towards his mother as he did so. He was too late to reclaim his place. The fire had come.

The window burst like a glittering cloud and the blaze filled the room. Jude was flung off her feet, but clutched the banister long enough to see Sartori cover his face against the holocaust, as the woman in the circle opened her arms to accept it. Celestine was instantly consumed, but the fire seemed unappeased and would have spread to burn the house to its foundations had its momentum not been so great. It sped on through the room, demolishing the wall as it went. On, on, towards the second fog that Clerkenwell boasted tonight.

"What the fuck was that?" Monday said in the hallway

below.

"God," Jude replied. "Coming and going."

In the First, Hapexamendios raised His misbegotten head. Even though He didn't need the assembly of sight that gleamed in His skull to see what was happening in His Dominion—He had eyes everywhere—some memory of the body that had once been His sole residence made Him turn now, as best He could, and look behind Him.

"What is this?" He said.

Gentle couldn't see the fire yet, but he could feel whispers of its approach.

"What is this?" Hapexamendios said again.

Without waiting for a reply, He began feverishly to unknit his semblance, something Gentle had both

feared and hoped He'd do. Feared, because the body from which the fire had been issued would doubtless be its destination, and if it was too quickly undone, the fire would have no target. And hoped, because only in that undoing would he have a

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chance to locate Pie. The barrier around his Father's form softened as the God was distracted by the intricacies of this dismantling, and though Gentle had yet to get a second glimpse of Pie he turned his thought to entering the body; but for all His perplexity Hapexamendios was not about to be breached so readily. As Gentle approached, a will too powerful to be denied seized hold of him.

"What is this?" the God demanded a third time.

Hoping he might yet gain a few precious seconds' reprieve, Gentle answered with the truth.

"The Imajica's a circle," he said.

"A circle?"

"This is Your fire, Father. This is Your fire, coming around again."

Hapexamendios didn't respond with words. He understood instantly the significance of what He'd been told and let His hold on Gentle slip again, in order to turn all His will to the business of unknitting Himself.

The ungainly body began to unravel, and in its midst Gentle once again glimpsed Pie. This time, the mystif saw him. Its frail limbs thrashed to clear a way through the turbulent moil between them, but before Gentle could finally wrest himself from his Father's custody the ground beneath Pie's feet grew unsolid. The mystif reached up to take hold of some support in the body above, but it was decaying too fast. The ground gaped like a grave, and, with one last despairing look in Gentle's direction, the mystif sank from sight.

Gentle raised his head in a howl, but the sound he made was drowned out by that of his Father, who—as if in imitation of His child—had also thrown back His head. But His was a din of fury rather than sorrow, as He wrenched and thrashed in His attempts to speed His unmasking.

Behind Him, now, the fire. As it came Gentle thought he saw his mother's face in the blaze, shaped from ashes, her eyes and mouth wide as she returned to meet the God who'd raped, rejected, and finally murdered her. A glimpse, no more, and then the fire was upon its maker, its judgment absolute.

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Gentle's spirit was gone from the conflagration at a thought, but His Father—the world His flesh, the flesh His world—could not escape it. His fetal head broke, and the fire consumed the shards as they flew, its blaze cremating His heart and innards and spreading through His mismatched limbs, burning them away to every last fingertip

and toe.

The consequence for His city was both instantly felt and calamitous. Every street from one end of the Dominion to the other shook as the message of collapse went from the place where its First Cause had fallen. Gentle had nothing to fear from this dissolution, but the sight of it appalled him nevertheless. This was his Father, and it gave him neither pleasure nor satisfaction to see the body whose child he was now reel and bleed. The imperious towers began to topple, their ornament dropping in rococo rains, their arches forsaking the illusion of stone and falling as flesh. The streets heaved and turned to meat; the houses threw down their bony roofs. Despite the collapse around him, Gentle remained close to the place where his Father had been consumed, in the hope that he might yet find Piel oh' pah in the maelstrom. But it seemed Hapexamendios' last voluntary act had been to deny the lovers their reunion. He'd opened the ground and buried the mystic in the pit of His decay, sealing it with His will to prevent Gentle from ever finding Pie again.

There was nothing left for the Reconciler to do but leave the city to its decease, which in due course he did, not taking the route across the Dominions but going back the way the fire had come. As he flew, the sheer enormity of what was under way became apparent. If every living body that had passed a span on Earth had been left to putrefy here in the First, the sum of their flesh would not begin to approach that of this city. Nor would this carrion rot into the ground and its decomposition feed a new generation of life. It was *the ground*; it *was* the life. With its passing, there would only be putrescence here: decay laid on decay laid on decay. A Dominion of filth, polluted until the end of time.

Ahead, now, the fog that divided the city's outskirts from

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the Fifth. Gentle passed through it, returning gratefully to the modest streets of Clerkenwell. They were drab, of course, after the brilliance of the metropolis he'd left. But he knew the air had the sweetness of summer leaves upon it, even if he couldn't smell that sweetness, and the welcome sound of an engine from Holborn or Gray's Inn Road could be heard, as some fleet fellow, knowing the worst was past, got about his business. It was unlikely to be legal work at such an hour. But Gentle wished the driver well, even in his crime. The Dominion had been saved for thieves as well as saints.

He didn't linger at the passing place but went as fast as his weary thoughts would drive him, back to number 28 and the wounded body that was still clinging to continuance at the bottom of the stairs.

At the top, Jude hadn't waited for the smoke to clear before venturing into the Meditation Room. Despite a warning shout from Clem she'd gone up into the murk to find Sar-tori, hoping that he'd survived. His creatures hadn't. Their corpses were twitching close to the threshold, not struck by the blast, she thought, but laid low by their summoner's decline. She found that summoner easily enough. He was lying close to where Celestine had pitched him, his body arrested in the act of turning towards the circle.

It had been his undoing. The fire that had carried his mother to oblivion had seared every part of him. The ashes of his clothes had been fused with his blistered back, his hair singed from his scalp, his face cooked beyond tenderness. But like his brother, lying in ribbons below, he refused to give up life. His fingers clutched the boards; his lips still worked, baring teeth as bright as a death's-head smile. There was even power in his sinews. When his blood-filled eyes saw Jude he managed to push himself up, until his body rolled over onto its charred spine, and he used his agonies to fuel the hand that clutched at her, dragging her down beside him.

"My mother..."

"She's gone."

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There was bafflement on his face. "Why?" he said, shudders convulsing him as he spoke. "She seemed... to want it. Why?"

"So that she'd be there when the fire took Hapexamen-dios," Jude replied.

He shook his head, not comprehending the significance of this.

"How... could that... be?" he murmured.

"The Imajica's a circle," she said. He studied her face, attempting to puzzle this out. "The fire went back to the one who sent it."

Now the sense of what she was telling him dawned. Even in his agony, there was a greater pain.

"He's gone?" he said.

She wanted to say, I hope so, but she kept that sentiment to herself and simply nodded.

"And my mother too?" Sartori went on. The trembling quieted; so did his voice, which was already frail. "I'm alone," he said.

The anguish in these last few words was bottomless, and she longed to have some way of comforting him. She was afraid to touch him for fear of causing him still greater discomfort, but perhaps there was more hurt in her not doing so. With the greatest delicacy she laid her hand over his.

"You're not alone," she said. "I'm here."

He didn't acknowledge her solace, perhaps didn't even hear it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"I should never have touched him," he said softly. "Aman shouldn't lay hands on his own brother."

As he squeezed out these words there was a moan from the bottom of the stairs, followed by a yelp of pure joy from Clem, and then Monday's ecstatic whoops.

"Boss oh boss oh boss!"

"Do you hear that?" Jude said to Sartori.

"Yes...."

"I don't think you killed him after all."

A strange tic appeared around his mouth, which after a moment she realized was the shreds of a smile. She took it

to be pleasure at Gentle's survival, but its source was more bitter.

"That won't save me now," he said.

His hand, which was laid on his stomach, began to knead the muscles there, its clutches so violent that his body began to spasm. Blood bubbled up between his lips, and he moved his hand to his mouth, as if to conceal it. There, he seemed to spit his blood into his palm. Then he removed his hand and offered its grisly contents to her.

"Take it," he said, uncurling his fist.

She felt something drop into her hand. She didn't glance at his gift, however, but kept her eyes fixed on his face as he looked away from her, back towards the circle. She realized, even before his gaze had found its resting place, that he was looking away from her for the final time, and she started to call him back. She said his name; she called him love; she said she'd never wanted to desert him, and never would again, if he'd only stay. But her words were wasted. As his eyes found the circle, the life went from them, his last sight not of her but of the place where he'd been made.

In her palm, bloody from his belly and throat, lay the blue egg.

After a time, she got up and went out onto the landing. The place at the bottom of the stairs where Gentle's body had lain was empty. Clem was standing in the candlelight with both tears and a broad smile on his face. He looked up at Jude as she started down the stairs.

"Sartori?" he said.

"He's dead."

"What about Celestine?"

"Gone," she said.

"But it's over, isn't it?" Hoi-Polloi said. "We're going to live."

"Are we?"

"Yes, we are," said Clem. "Gentle saw Hapexamendios destroyed."

"Where *is* Gentle?"

"He went outside," Clem said. "He's got enough life in him—"

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"For another life?"

"For another twenty, the lucky bugger," came Tay's reply.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she put her arms around Gentle's protectors, then went out onto the step. Gentle was standing in the middle of the street, wrapped in one of Celestine's sheets. Monday was at

his side, and he was leaning on the boy as he stared up at the tree that grew outside number 28. Hapexamendios' fire had charred much of its foliage, leaving the branches naked and blackened. But there was a breeze stirring the leaves that had survived, and after such a long motionless time even these shreds of wind were welcome: final, simple proof that the Imajica had survived its perils and was once again drawing breath.

She hesitated to join him, thinking perhaps he'd prefer to have these moments of meditation uninterrupted. But his gaze came her way after half a minute or so, and though there was only starlight and the last guttering flames in the fretwork above to see him by, the smile was as luminous as ever, and as inviting. She left the step but, as she approached, saw that his smile was slender and the wound she'd sustained deeper than cuts.

"I failed," he said.

"The Imajica's whole," she replied. "That isn't failure."

He looked away from her, down the street. The darkness was full of agitation.

"The ghosts are still here," he said. "I swore to them I'd find a way out, and I failed. That was why I went with Pie in the first place, to find Taylor a way out—"

"Maybe there isn't one," came a third voice.

Clem had appeared on the doorstep, but it was Tay who spoke.

"I promised you an answer," Gentle said.

"And you found one. The Imajica's a circle, and there's no way out of it. We just go round and round. Well, that's not so bad, Gentle, We have what we have."

Gentle lifted his hand from Monday's shoulder and turned away from the tree, and from Jude, and from the an-

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gels on the step. As he hobbled out into the middle of the street, his head bowed, he murmured a reply to Tay too quiet for any but an angel's ear. "It's not enough," he said.

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For the living occupants of Gamut Street, the days that followed the events of that midsummer were as strange in their way as anything that had gone before. The world that returned to life around them seemed to be totally ignorant of the fact that its existence had hung in the balance, and if it now sensed the least change in its condition it concealed its suspicion very well. The monsoons and heat waves that had preceded the Reconciliation were replaced the next morning with the drizzles and tepid sunshine of an English summer, its moderation the model for public behavior in subsequent weeks. The eruptions of irrationality which had turned every junction and street corner into a little battleground summarily ceased; the night walkers Monday and Jude had seen watching for revelation no longer strayed out to peer

quizzically at the stars.

In any city other than London, perhaps the mysteries now present in its streets would have been discovered and celebrated. If such fogs as lingered in Clerkenwell had appeared instead in Rome, the Vatican would have been pronouncing on them within a week. Had they appeared in Mexico City, the poor would have been through them in a shorter time still, desperate for a better life in the world beyond. But England: oh! England. It had never had much of a taste for the mystical, and with all but the weakest of its evocators and feigning workers murdered by the Tabula Rasa, there was nobody to begin the labor of freeing minds locked up in dogmas and utilities.

The fogs were not entirely ignored, however. The animal

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life of the city knew something was afoot and came to Clerkenwell to sniff it out. The runaway dogs who'd gathered in the vicinity of Gamut Street when the revenants had come, only to be frightened off by Sartori's horde, now returned, their noses twitching after some piquant scent or other. Cats came too, yowling in the trees at dusk, curious but casual. There were also visitations by bees, and birds, who twice in the three days following midsummer gathered in the same stupefying numbers as Monday and Jude had witnessed at the Retreat. In all these cases the packs, swarms, and flocks disappeared after a time, having discovered the source of the perfumes and poles that had directed them to the district and gone into the Fourth to have a life under different skies.

But if no two-legged traffic passed into the Fourth, there was certainly some in the opposite direction. A little over a week after the Reconciliation, Tick Raw arrived on the doorstep of number 28 and, having introduced himself to Clem and Monday, asked to see the Maestro. He came into a house that was a good deal more comfortable than his quarters in Vanaeph, furnished as it was from a score of recent burglaries by Monday and Clem. But the atmosphere of domesticity was cosmetic. Though the bodies of the gek-a-gek had been removed and buried, along with their sum-moner, beneath the long grass in Shiverick Square; though the front door had been mended and the bloodstains mopped up; though the Meditation Room had been scoured and the stones of the circle individually wrapped in linen and locked away, the house was charged with all that had happened here: the deaths, the love scenes, the reunions and revelations.

"You're living in the middle of a history lesson," Tick Raw said when he sat himself down beside the bed in which Gentle lay.

The Reconciler was healing, but even with his extraordinary powers of recuperation it would be a lengthy business. He slept twenty hours or more out of every twenty-four and barely ventured from his mattress when he was awake.

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"You look as though you've seen some wars, my friend," Tick Raw said.

"More than I'd like," Gentle replied wearily.

"I sniff something Oviate."

"Gek-a-gek," Gentle said. "Don't worry, they're gone."

"Did they break through during the ceremony?"

"No. It's more complicated than that. Ask Clem. He'll tell you the whole story."

"No offense to your friends," Tick Raw said, fetching a jar of pickled sausage from his pocket, "but I'd prefer to hear it from you."

"I've thought about it too much as it is," Gentle said. "I don't want to be reminded."

"But we won the day," Tick Raw said. "Doesn't that merit a little celebration?"

"Celebrate with Clem, Tick. I need to sleep."

"As you like, as you like," Tick Raw said, retreating to the door. "Oh. I wonder? Do you mind if I stay here for a few days? There's a number of parties in Vanaeph who want the grand tour of the Fifth, and I've volunteered to show them the sights. But as I don't yet know them myself—"

"Be my guest," Gentle said. "And forgive me if I don't brim with bonhomie."

"No apology required," Tick Raw said. "I'll leave you to sleep."

That evening, Tick did as Gentle had suggested and plied both Clem and Monday with questions until he had the full story.

"So when do I meet the mesmeric Judith?" he asked when the tale was told.

"I don't know if you ever will," Clem said. "She didn't come back to the house after we buried Sartori."

"Where is she?"

"Wherever she is," Monday said dolefully, "Hoi-Polloi's with her. Just my fuckin' luck."

"Well, now, listen," Tick Raw said. "I've always had away with the ladies. I'll make you a deal. If you show me this city, inside out, I'll show you a few ladies the same way."

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Monday's palm went from his pocket, where it'd been stroking the consequence of Hoi-Polloi's absence, and seized hold of Tick Raw's hand before it was even extended.

"You're a gentleman and a squalor," Monday said. "You got yourself a tour, mate."

"What about Gentle?" Tick Raw said to Clem. "Is he languishing for want of female company?"

"No, he's just tired. He'll get well."

"Will he?" said Tick Raw. "I'm not so sure. He's got the look of a man who'd be happier dead than alive."

"Don't say that."

"Very well. I didn't say it. But he has, Clement. And we all know it."

The vigor and noise Tick Raw brought into the house only served to emphasize the truth of that observation. As the days passed and turned to weeks, there was little or no improvement in Gentle's mood. He was, as Tick Raw had said, languishing, and Clem began to feel the way he had during Tay's final decline. A loved one was slipping away, and he could do nothing to prevent it. There weren't even those moments of levity that there'd been with Tay, when good times had been remembered and the pain superseded. Gentle wanted no false comforts, no laughter, no sympathy. He simply wanted to lie in his bed and steadily become as bland as the sheets he lay upon. Sometimes, in his sleep, the angels would hear him speaking in tongues, the way Tay had heard him talk before. But it was nonsense that he muttered: reports from a mind that was rambling without map or destination.

Tick Raw stayed in the house a month, leaving with Monday at dawn and returning late, having had another day seeing the sights and acquiring the appetites of this new Dominion. His sense of wonder was boundless, his capacity for pleasure prodigious. He found he had a taste for eel pie and Elgar, for Speaker's Corner at Sunday noon and the Ripper's haunts at midnight; for dog races, for jazz, for waistcoats made in Saville Row and women hired behind King's

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Cross Station. As for Monday, it was clear from the face he wore whenever he returned that the hurt of Hoi-Polloi's desertion was being kissed away. When Tick Raw finally announced that it was time to return to the Fourth, the boy was crestfallen.

"Don't worry," Tick told him. "I'll be back. And I won't be alone."

Before he departed, he presented himself at Gentle's bedside with a proposal.

"Come to the Fourth with me," he said, "it's time you saw Patashoqua."

Gentle shook his head.

"But you haven't seen the Merrow Ti' Ti!" Tick protested.

"I know what you're trying to do, Tick," Gentle said. "And I thank you for it, really I do, but I don't want to see the Fourth again."

"Well, what *do* you want to see?"

The answer was simple: "Nothing."

"Oh, now stop this, Gentle," Tick Raw said. "It's getting damn boring. You're behaving as though we lost everything. We didn't."

"I did."

"She'll come back. You'll see."

"Who will?"

"Judith."

Gentle almost laughed at this. "It's not Judith I've lost," he said.

Tick Raw realized his error then, and came as near to dumbfounded as he ever got. All he could manage was: "Ah...."

For the first time since Tick Raw had appeared at his bedside the month before, Gentle actually looked at his guest. "Tick," he said. "I'm going to tell you something I've told nobody else."

"What's that?"

"When I was in my Father's city . . ." He paused, although the will to tell was going from him already, then

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began again. "When I was in my Father's city I saw Pie 'oh' pah."

"Alive?"

"For a time."

"Oh, Jesu. How did it die?"

"The ground opened up beneath it."

"That's terrible; terrible."

"Do you see now why it doesn't feel like a victory?"

"Yes, I see. But Gentle—"

"No more persuasions, Tick."

"—there are such changes in the air. Maybe there are themiracles in the First, the way there are in Yzordderrex. It's not out of the question."

Gentle studied his tormentor, eyes narrowed.

"The Eurhetemecs were in the First long before Hapexa-mendios, remember," Tick went on. "And they workedwonders there. Maybe those times have returned. The landdoesn't forget. Men forget; Maestros forget. But the land?Never."

He stood up.

"Come with me to a passing place," he said. "Let's look for ourselves. Where's the harm? I'll carry you on my backif your legs don't work."

"That won't be necessary," Gentle said, and throwing offthe sheets got out of bed.

Though the month of August had yet to begin, the early months of summer had been marked by such excesses that the season had burned itself out prematurely, and when Gentle, accompanied by Tick and Clem, stepped out into Gamut Street, he met the first chills of autumn on the step. Clem had found the fog that let onto the First Dominion within forty-eight hours of the Reconciliation, but had not entered it. After all that he'd heard about the state of the Unbeheld's city, he'd had no wish to see its horrors. He led the Maestros to the place readily enough, however. It was little more than half a mile from the house, hidden in a cloister behind an empty office building: a bank of gray fog, no

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more than twice the height of a man, which rolled upon itself in the shadowed corner of the empty yard.

"Let me go first," Clem said to Gentle. "We're still your guardians."

"You've done more than enough," Gentle said. "Stay here. This won't take long."

Clem didn't contradict the instruction but stepped aside to let the Maestros enter the fog. Gentle had passed between Dominions many times now and was used to the brief disorientation that always accompanied such passage. But nothing, not even the abattoir nightmares that had haunted him after the Reconciliation, could have prepared him for what was waiting on the other side. Tick Raw, ever a man of instant responses, vomited as the stench of putrescence came to meet them through the fog, and though he stumbled after Gentle, determined not to leave his friend to face the First alone, he covered his eyes after a single glance.

The Dominion was decayed from horizon to horizon. Everywhere rot, and more rot: suppurating lakes of it, and festering hills. Overhead, in skies Gentle had barely seen as he passed through his Father's city, clouds the color of old bruises half hid two yellowish moons, their light falling on a filth so atrocious the hungriest kite in the Kwem would have starved rather than feed here.

"This was the City of God, Tick," Gentle said. "This was my Father. This was the Unbeheld."

In a sudden fury he tore at Tick's hands, which were clamped to the man's face.

"Look, damn you, *look!* I want to hear you tell me about the wonders, Tick! Go on! Tell me! *Tell me!*"

Tick didn't go back to the house when he and Gentle emerged from the passing place, but with some murmured words of apology headed off into the dusk, saying he needed to be on his home turf for a while and that he'd come back when he'd regained his composure. Sure enough, three days later he reappeared at number 28, still a little queasy, still a little shamefaced, to find that Gentle had not returned to his bed but was up and about. The Recon-

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ciler's mood was brisk rather than blithe. His bed, he explained to Tick, was not the refuge it had previously been. As soon as he closed his eyes he saw the slaughterhouse of the First in every atrocious detail and could now only sleep when he'd driven himself to such exhaustion that there was no time between his head striking the pillow and oblivion for his mind to dwell on what he'd witnessed.

Luckily, Tick had brought distractions, in the form of a party of eight tourists (he preferred *excursionists*) from Vanaeph who were relying upon him to introduce them to the rites and rarities of the Fifth Dominion.

Before the tour began, however, they were eager to pay their respects to the great Reconciler, and did so with a succession of painfully overworked speeches, which they read aloud before presenting Gentle with the gifts they'd brought: smoked meats, perfumes, a small picture of Patashoqua rendered in zarzi wings, a pamphlet of erotic poems by Pluthero Quexos' sister.

The group was the first of many Tick brought in the next few weeks, freely admitting to Gentle that he was turning a handsome profit from his new role. "Have a Holy Day in the City of Sartori" was his pitch and the more satisfied customers who returned to Vanaeph with tales of eel pies and Jack the Ripper, the more who signed on to take the excursion. He knew the boom time couldn't last, of course. In a short while the professional tour operators in Patashoqua would start trading, and he'd be unable to compete with their slick packages, except in one particular regard. Only he could guarantee an audience, however brief, with the Maestro Sartori himself.

The time was coming, Gentle realized, when the Fifth would have to face the fact that it was Reconciled, whether it liked it or not. The first few sightseers from Vanaeph and Patashoqua might be ignored; but when their families came, and their families' families—creatures in shapes, size, and assemblies that demanded attention—the people of this Dominion would be able to overlook them no longer. It would not be long before Gamut Street became a sacred highway, with travelers passing down it in not one but both

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directions. When it did, living in the house would become untenable. He, Clem, and Monday would have to vacate number 28 and leave it to become a shrine.

When that day arrived—and it would be soon—he would be forced to make a momentous decision. Should he seek out some sanctuary here in Britain or leave the island for a country where none of his lives had ever, taken him? Of one thing he was certain: he would not return to the Fourth, or any Dominion beyond it. Though it was true that he'd never seen Patashoqua, there had only ever been one soul he'd wanted to see it with, and that soul was gone.

2

Times were no less strange or demanding for Jude. She'd decided to leave the company in Gamut Street on the spur of the moment, expecting that she'd return there in due course. But the longer she stayed away, the harder it became to return. She hadn't realized, until Sartori was gone, how much she'd mourn. Whatever the source of the feelings she had for him, she felt no regrets. All she felt was loss. Night after night she'd wake up in the little flat she and Hoi-Polloi had rented together (the old place was too full of memories), shaken to tears by the same terrible dream. She was climbing those damn stairs in Gamut Street, trying to reach Sartori as he lay burning at the top, but for all her toil never managing to advance a single step. And always the same words on her lips when Hoi-Polloi woke her.

"Stay with me. Stay with me."

Though he'd gone forever, and she would have to make her peace with that eventually, he'd left a living keepsake, and as the autumn months came it began to make its presence felt in no uncertain fashion, its kicking keeping her awake when the nightmares didn't. She didn't like the way she looked in the mirror, her stomach a glossy dome, her breasts swelling and tender, but Hoi-Polloi was there to lend comfort and companionship whenever it was needed. She was all Jude could have asked for during those months: loyal, practical, and eager to learn. Though the customs of

the Fifth were a mystery to her at first, she soon became familiar with its eccentricities and even fond of them. This was not, however, a situation that could continue indefinitely. If they stayed in the Fifth, and Jude had the child there, what could she promise it? A rearing and an education in a Dominion that might come to appreciate the miracles in its midst some distant day, but would in the meantime ignore or reject whatever extraordinary qualities the child was blessed with.

By the middle of October she'd made up her mind. She'd leave the Fifth, with or without Hoi-Polloi, and find some country in the Imajica where the child, whether it was a prophetic, a melancholic, or simply tripartite, would be allowed to flourish. In order to take that journey, of course, she would have to return to Gamut Street or its environs, and though that was not a particularly attractive prospect, it was better to do so soon, she reasoned, before many more sleepless nights took their toll and she felt too weak. She shared her plans with Hoi-Polloi, who declared herself happy to go wherever Jude wished to lead. They made swift preparations and four days later left the flat for the last time, with a small collection of valuables to pawn when they got to the Fourth.

The evening was cold, and the moon, when it rose, had an amethyst halo. By its light the thoroughfares around Gamut Street were iridescent with the first etchings of frost. At Jude's request they went first to Shiverick Square, so that she could pay her last respects to Sartori. Both his grave and those of the Oviates had been well disguised by Monday and Clem, and it took her quite a while to find the place where he was buried. But find it she did and spent twenty minutes there while Hoi-Polloi waited at the railings. Though there were revenants in the nearby streets, she knew he would never join their ranks. He'd not been born, but made, the stuff of his life stolen. The only existence he had after his decease was in her memory and in the child. She didn't weep for that fact, or even for his absence. She'd done all she could, weeping and begging him to stay. But she did tell the earth that she'd loved what it was heaped

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upon and charged it to give Sartori comfort in his dreamless sleep.

Then she quit the graveside, and together she and Hoi-Polloi went looking for the passing place into the Fourth. It would be day there, bright day, and she'd call herself by another name.

Number 28 was noisy that night, the cause a celebration in honor of Irish, who'd that afternoon been released from prison, having served a three-month sentence for petty theft, and had arrived on the doorstep—with Carol, Benedict, and several cases of stolen whisky—to toast his release. The house was by now a trove of treasures—all gifts to the Maestro from Tick Raw's excursionists—and there was no end to the drunken fooling these artifacts, many of them total enigmas, inspired. Gentle was feeling as facetious as Irish, if not more so. After so many weeks of abstinence the substantial amounts of whisky he'd imbibed had his head spinning, and he resisted Clem's attempts to engage him in serious conversation, despite the latter's insistence that the matter was urgent. Only after some persuading did he follow Clem to a quieter place in the house, where his angels told him that Judith was in the vicinity. He was somewhat sobered by the news.

"Is she coming here?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Clem said, his tongue passing back and forth over his lips as though her taste was upon them. "But she's close."

Gentle didn't need further prompting. With Monday in tow he went out into the street. There were no living creatures in sight. Only the revenants, listless as ever, their joylessness made all the more apparent by the sound of merrymaking that emanated from the house.

"I don't see her," Gentle said to Clem, who had followed them out as far as the step. "Are you sure she's here?"

It was Tay who replied. "You think I wouldn't know when Judy was near? Of course I'm certain."

"Which direction?" Monday wanted to know.

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Now Clem again, cautioning; "Perhaps she doesn't want to see us."

"Well, I want to see *her*," Gentle replied. "At least a drink, for old time's sake. Which direction, Tay?"

The angels pointed, and Gentle headed off down the street, with Monday, bottle in hand, close on his heels.

The fog that let onto the Fourth looked inviting: a slow wave of pale mist that turned and turned on itself, but never broke. Before she and Hoi-Polloi stepped into it, Jude took a few moments to look up. The Plow was overhead. She wouldn't be seeing it again. Then she said, "That's enough goodbyes," and together they took a step into the mist.

As they did so Jude heard the sound of running feet in the alleyway behind them and Gentle, calling her name. She'd been aware that their presence might be detected and had schooled them both in how best to respond. Neither woman turned. They simply picked up their pace and headed on through the mist. It thickened as they went, but after a dozen steps daylight began to filter through from the other side, and the fog's clammy cold gave way to balm. Again, Gentle called after her, but there was a commotion up ahead, and it all but drowned out his call.

Back in the Fifth, Gentle came to a halt at the edge of the fog. He'd sworn to himself that he'd never leave the Dominion again, but the drink swilling in his system had weakened his resolve. His feet itched to go after her into the fog.

"Well, boss," Monday said. "Are we going or aren't we?"

"Do you care either way?"

"Yes, as it happens."

"You'd still like to get your hands on Hoi-Polloi, huh?"

"I dream about her, boss. Cross-eyed girls, every night."

"Ah, well," Gentle said. "If we're chasing dreams, then I think that's good reason to go."

"Yeah?"

"In fact it's the only reason."

He grabbed hold of Monday's bottle and took a healthyswig from it.

"Let's do it," he said, and together they plunged into the fog, running over ground that softened and brightened as they went, paving stones becoming sand, night becoming day.

They caught sight of the women briefly, gray silhouettes against the peacock sky ahead, then lost them again as they gave chase. The gleam of day grew, however, and so did the sound of voices, which rose to the din of an excited crowd as they emerged from the passing place. There were buyers, sellers, and thieves on every side, and, disappearing into the throng, the women. They followed with renewed fervor, but the tide of people conspired to keep them from their quarry, and after half an hour of fruitless pursuit, which finally brought them back to the fog and the commercial hub which surrounded it, they had to admit that they'd been outmaneuvered.

Gentle was tetchy now, his head no longer buzzing but aching. "They're away," he said. "Let's give up on it."

"Shit."

"People come, people go. You can't afford to get attached to anyone."

"It's too late," Monday said dolefully. "I am."

Gentle squinted at the fog, his lips pursed. It was a cold October on the other side.

"I tell you what," he said after a little time. "We'll wander over to Vanaeph and see if we can find Tick Raw. Maybe he can help us."

Monday beamed. "You're a hero, boss. Lead the way."

Gentle went on tiptoe, attempting to orient himself.

"Trouble is, I haven't a bloody clue where Vanaeph is," he said.

He collared the nearest passerby and asked him how to get to the Mount. The fellow pointed over the heads of the crowd, leaving the boss and his boy to burrow their way to the edge of the market, where they had a view not of Vanaeph but of the walled city that stood between them and the Mount of Lipper Bayak. The grin reappeared on Monday's face, broader than ever, and on his lips the name he'd so often breathed like an enchantment.

"Patashoqua?"

"Yes."

"We painted it on the wall together, d'you remember?"

"I remember."

"What's it like inside?"

Gentle was peering at the bottle in his hand, wondering if the peculiar exhilaration he felt was going to pass with the headache that accompanied it.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"I said, what's it like inside?"

"I don't know. I've never been."

"Well, shouldn't we?"

Gentle thrust the bottle at Monday and sighed, a lazy, easy sigh that ended in a smile. "Yes, my friend," he said. "I think maybe we should."

3

Thus began the last pilgrimage of the Maestro Sartori—called John Furie Zacharias, or Gentle, the Reconciler of Dominions—across the Imajica.

He hadn't intended it to be a pilgrimage at all, but having promised Monday that they would find the woman of his dreams, he couldn't bring himself to desert the boy and return to the Fifth. They began their search, of course, in Patashoqua, which was more prosperous than ever these days, with its proximity to the newly reconciled Dominion creating businesses every day. After almost a year of wondering what the city would be like, Gentle was inevitably somewhat disappointed once he got inside its walls, but Monday's enthusiasm was a sight in itself, and a poignant reminder of his own astonishment when he and Pie had first entered the Fourth.

Unable to trace the women in the city, they went on to Vanaeph, hoping to find Tick. He was off traveling, they were told, but one sharp-sighted individual claimed to have seen two women who fitted the description of Jude and Hoi-Polloi hitching a ride at the edge of the highway. An

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hour later, Gentle and Monday were doing the same thing, and the pursuit that was to take them across the Dominions began in earnest.

For the Maestro the journey was very different from those that had preceded it. The first time he'd made this trek he'd traveled in ignorance of himself, failing to comprehend the significance of the people he'd met and the places he'd seen. The second time he'd been a phantom, flying at the speed of thought between members of the Synod, his business too urgent to allow him to appreciate the myriad wonders he was passing through. But now, finally, he had both the time and the comprehension to make sense of his pilgrimage, and, having begun the journey reluctantly, he soon had as much taste for it as his companion.

Word of the changes in Yzordderrex had spread even to the tiniest villages, and the demise of the Autarch's Empire was everywhere cause for jubilation. Rumors of the Imajica's healing had also spread, and when Monday told people where he and his quiet companion came from (which he was wont to do at the vaguest cue) they were plied with drinks and grilled for news of the paradisiacal Fifth. Many of their questioners, knowing that the door into that mystery finally stood open, were planning to visit the Fifth and wanted to know what gifts they should take with them into a Dominion that was already so full of marvels. When this question was put, Gentle, who usually let Monday do the talking during these interviews, invariably spoke up.

"Take your family histories," he'd say. "Take your poems. Take your jokes. Take your lullabies. Make them understand in the Fifth what glories there are here."

People tended to look at him askance when he answered in this fashion, and told him that their jokes and their family histories didn't seem particularly glorious. Gentle would simply say, "They're you. And you're the best gift the Fifth could be given."

"You know, we could have made a fortune if we'd brought a few maps of England with us," Monday remarked one day.

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"Do we care about fortunes?" Gentle said.

"You might not, boss," Monday replied. "Personally, I'm much in favor."

He was right, Gentle thought. They could have sold a thousand maps already, and they were only just entering the Third: maps which would have been copied, and the copies copied, each transcriber inevitably adding their own felicities to the design. The thought of such proliferation led Gentle back to his own hand, which had seldom worked for any purpose other than profit, and which for all its labor had never produced anything of lasting value. But unlike the paintings he'd forged, maps weren't cursed by the notion of a definitive original. They grew in the copying, as their inaccuracies were corrected, their empty spaces filled, their legends redeviced. And even when all the corrections had been made, to the finest detail, they could still never be cursed with the word *finished*, because their subject continued to change. Rivers widened and meandered, or dried up altogether; islands rose and sank again; even mountains moved. By their very nature, maps were always works in progress, and Gentle—his resolve strengthened by thinking of them that way—decided after many months of delay to turn his hand to making one.

Occasionally along the road they'd meet an individual who, in ignorance of his audience, would boast some association with the Fifth's most celebrated son, the Maestro Sartori, and would proceed to tell Gentle and Monday about the great man. The accounts varied, especially when it came to talk of his companion. Some said he'd had a beautiful woman at his side; some his brother, called Pie; others still (these the least numerous) told of a mystic. At first it was all Monday could do not to blurt the truth, but Gentle had insisted from the outset that he wanted to travel incognito, and having been sworn to secrecy the boy was as good as his word. He kept his silence while wild tales of the Maestro's doings were told: marriages celebrated on the ceiling; corpses springing up overnight where he'd slept; women made pregnant drinking from his cup. The fact that he'd

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become a figment of the popular imagination amused Gentle at first, but after a time it began to weigh

on him. He felt like a ghost among these living versions of himself, invisible among the listeners who gathered to hear tales of his exploits, the details of which were embroidered and embellished with every telling.

There was some comfort in the fact that he was not the only character around whom such parables occurred. There were other fables alive in the air between the ears and tongues of the populace, which the pilgrims were usually told when they asked after Jude and Hoi-Polloi: tales of miraculous women. A whole new nomadic tribe had appeared in the Dominions since the fall of Yzordderrex. Women of power were abroad, rising to the occasion of their liberation, and rites they'd only practiced at the hearth and cot were now performed in the open air for all to see. But unlike the stories of the Maestro Sartori, most of which were pure invention, Gentle and Monday saw ample evidence that the stories concerning these women were rooted in truth. In the province around Mai-ke, for instance, which had been a dust bowl during Gentle's first pilgrimage, they found fields green with the first crop in six seasons, courtesy of a woman who'd sniffed out the course of an underground river and coaxed it to the surface with sways and supplications. In the temples of L'Himby a sibyl had carved from a solid slab—using only her finger and her spittle—a representation of the city as she prophesied it would be in a year's time, her prophecy so mesmeric that her audience had gone out of the temple that very hour and had torn down the trash that had disfigured their city. In the Kwem—where Gentle took Monday in the hope of finding Scopique—they found instead that the once shallow pit where the Pivot had stood was now a lake, its waters crystal-line but its bottom hidden by the congregation of life that was forming in it: birds, mostly, which rose in sudden excited flocks, fully feathered and ready for the sky.

Here they had a chance to meet the miracle worker, for the woman who'd made these waters (literally, her acolyte said; it was the pissing of a single night) had taken up resi-

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dence in the blackened husk of the Kwem Palace. In the hope of gleaning some clue to Jude and Hoi-Polloi's whereabouts, Gentle ventured into the shadows to find the lake maker, and though she refused to show herself she answered his inquiry. No, she hadn't seen a pair of travelers such as he described, but yes, she could tell him where they'd gone. There were only two directions for wandering women these days, she explained: out of Yzordderrex and into it.

He thanked her for this information and asked her if there was anything he could do for her in return. She told him that there was nothing she wanted from him personally, but she'd be very glad of the company of his boy for an hour or two. Somewhat chagrined, Gentle went out and asked Monday if he was willing to chance the woman's embrace for a while. He said he was and left the Maestro to find himself a seat by the bird-breeding lake while he ventured into its maker's boudoir. It was the first time in Gentle's life that any woman in search of sexual attentions had passed him over for another. If ever he'd needed proof that his day was done, it was here.

When, after two hours, Monday reappeared (with a flushed face and ringing ears), it was to find Gentle sitting at the lakeside, long ago tired of working on his map, surrounded by several small cairns of pebbles.

"What are these?" the boy said.

"I've been counting my romances," Gentle replied. "Each one of them is a hundred women."

There were seven cairns.

"Is that them all?" Monday said.

"It's all that I remember."

Monday squatted down beside the stones. "I bet you'd like to love them all over again," he said.

Gentle thought about this for a little time and finally said, "No. I don't think so. I've done my best work. It's time to leave it to the younger men."

He tossed the stone he had in hand out into the middle of the teeming lake.

"Before you ask," he said. "That was Jude."

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There were no diversions after that, nor any need to pursue rumors of women hither and thither. They knew where Jude and Hoi-Polloi had gone. Having left the lake, they were on the Lenten Way within a matter of hours. Unlike so much else, the Way hadn't changed. It was as busy and as wide as ever: an arrow, driving its straight way into the hot heart of Yzordderrex.

26

I

In the Fifth, winter came: not suddenly but certainly. Hal?lowe'en was the last time people chanced the night air without coats, hats, and gloves, and it saw the first substantial visitation of Londoners to Gamut Street—revelers who'd taken the spirit of All Hallows' Eve to heart and come to see if there was any truth in the bizarre rumors they'd heard about the neighborhood. Some retreated after a very short time, but the braver among them stayed to explore, a few lingering outside number 28, where they puzzled over the designs on the door and peered up at the carbonized tree that shaded the house from the stars.

After that evening the cold's nip became a bite, and the bite a gnaw, until by late November the temperatures were low enough to keep even the most ardent tomcat at the fire. But the flow of visitors—in both directions—didn't cease. Night after night ordinary citizens appeared in Gamut Street to brush shoulders with the excursionists who were coming in the opposite direction. Some of the former became such regular visitors that Clem began to recognize them and was able to watch their investigations grow less tentative as they realized that the sensations they felt were not the first signs of lunacy. There were wonders to be found here, and one by one these men and women must have discovered the source, because they invariably disap-

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peared. Others, perhaps too afraid to venture into the passing places alone, came with trusted friends, showing them the street as though it were a secret vice, talking in whispers, then laughing out loud when they found their loved ones could see the apparitions too.

Word was spreading. But that fact was the only pleasure those bitter days and nights provided. Though Tick Raw spent more and more time in the house and was lively company, Clem missed Gentle badly. He hadn't been altogether surprised at his abrupt departure (he'd known, even if Gentle hadn't, that sooner or later the Maestro would leave the Dominion), but now his truest company was the man with

whom he shared his skull, and as the first anniversary of Tay's death approached the mood of both grew steadily darker. The presence of so many living souls on the street only served to make the revenants who'd occupied it through the summer months feel further disenfranchised, and their distress was contagious. Though Tay had been happy to stay with Clem through the preparations for the Great Work, their time as angels was over, and Tay felt the same need as those ghosts who roamed outside the house: to be gone.

As December came, Clem began to wonder how many more weeks he could keep his post, when it seemed every hour the despair of the ghost in him grew. After much debate with himself he decided that Christmas would mark the last day of his service in Gamut Street. After that he'd leave number 28 to be tramped around by Tick's excursions and go back to the house where a year before he and Tay had celebrated the Return of the Unvanquished Sun.

2

Jude and Hoi-Polloi had taken their time crossing the Dominion, but with so many roads to choose between, and so many incidental joys along the way, going quickly seemed almost criminal. They had no reason to hurry. There was nothing behind them to drive them on, and nothing in front summoning them. At least, so Jude pretended. Time and

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time again, when the issue of their ultimate destination cropped up in conversation, she avoided talking about the place she knew in her heart of hearts they would eventually reach. But if the name of that city wasn't on *her* lips, it was on the lips of almost every other woman they met, and when Hoi-Polloi mentioned that it was her birthplace questions from fellow travelers would invariably flow thick and fast. Was it true that the harbor was now filled at every tide with fish that had swum up from the depths of the ocean, ancient creatures that knew the secret of the origins of women and swam up the rivered streets at night to worship the Goddesses on the hill? Was it true that the women there could have children without any need of men whatsoever, and that some could even *dream* babies into being? And were there fountains in that city that made the old young, and trees on which every fruit was new to the world? And so on, and so forth.

Though Jude was willing, if pressed, to supply descriptions of what she'd seen in Yzordderex, her accounts of how the palace had been refashioned by water, and of streams that defied gravity, were not particularly remarkable in the face of what rumor was claiming about Yzordderex. After a few conversations in which she was urged to describe marvels she had no knowledge of—as though the questioners were willing her to invent prodigies rather than disappoint them—she told Hoi-Polloi she'd not be drawn into any further debates on the subject. But her imagination refused to ignore the tales it heard, however preposterous, and with every mile they traveled along the Lenten Way, the *idea* of the city awaiting them at the end of their journey grew more intimidating. She fretted that perhaps the blessings bestowed on her there would be valueless after all the time she'd spent away from the place. Or that the Goddesses knew that she'd told Sartori—in all truth—that she loved him, and that Jokalaylau's condemnation of her would carry the day if she ever went back into their temple.

Once they were on the Lenten Way, however, such fears became academic. They were not going to turn back now, especially as both of them were becoming steadily more ex-

hausted. The city called them out of the fogs that lay between Dominions, and they would go into it together and face whatever judgments, prodigies, and deep-sea fish were waiting there.

Oh, but it was changed. A warmer season was on the second than when Jude had last been here, and with so much water running in the streets the air was tropical. But more breathtaking than the humidity was the growth it had engendered. Seeds and spores had been carried up from theseams and caverns beneath the city in vast numbers, and under the influence of the Goddesses' feits had matured with preternatural speed. Ancient forms of vegetation, most long believed extinct, had greened the rubble, turning the Keparates into luxuriant jungle. In the space of half a year Yzordderrex had come to resemble a lost city, sacred to women and children, its desolation salved by flora. The smell of ripeness was everywhere, its source the fruits that glistened on vine and bough and bush, the abundance of which had in turn attracted animals that would never have dared Yzordderrex under its previous regime. And running through this cornucopia, feeding the seeds it had raised from the underworld, the eternal waters, still flowing up the hillsides in their riotous way but no longer carrying their fleets of prayers. Either the requests of those who lived here had been answered, or else their baptisms had made them their own healers and restorers.

Jude and Hoi-Polloi didn't go up to the palace the day they arrived. Nor the day after, nor the day after that. Instead, they searched for the Peccable house and there made themselves comfortable, though the tulips on the dining room table had been replaced by a throng of blossoms that had erupted through the floor, and the roof had become an aviary. After so long a journey, in which they'd not known from night to night where they were going to lay their heads, these were minor inconveniences, and they were grateful to be at rest, lulled to sleep by cooings and chatter-ings in beds that were more like bowers. When they woke, there was plenty to eat: fruit that could be picked off the

trees, water that ran clear and cold in the street outside, and, in some of the larger streams, fish, which formed the staple diet of the clans that lived in the vicinity.

There were men as well as women among these extended families, some of whom must have been members of the mobs and armies that had run so brutally riot on the night the Autarch fell. But either gratitude at having survived the revolution or the calming influence of the growth and plenty around them had persuaded them to better purpose. Hands that had maimed and murdered were now employed rebuilding a few of the houses, raising their walls not in defiance of the jungle, or the waters that fed it, but in league with both. This time, the architects were women, who'd come down from their baptisms inspired to use the wreckage of the old city to create a new one, and everywhere Jude saw echoes of the serene and elegant aesthetic that marked the Goddesses' handiwork.

There was no great sense of urgency attending these constructions, nor, she thought, any sign of a grand design being adhered to. The age of empire was over, and all dogmas, edicts, and conformities had gone with it. People solved the problems of putting a roof over their heads in their own way, knowing that the trees were both shady and bountiful in the meantime; the houses that resulted were as different as the faces of the women who supervised their construction. The Sartori she'd met in Gamut Street would have approved, Jude thought. Hadn't he touched her cheek during their penultimate encounter and told her he'd dreamed of a city built in her image? If that image was woman then here was that city, rising from the ruins.

So by day they had the murmuring canopy, the bubbling rivers, the heat, the laughter. And by night, slumbers beneath a feathered roof and dreams that were kind and uninterrupted. Such was the case, at

least, for a week. But on the eighth night, Jude was woken by Hoi-Polloi, who called her to the window.

"Look."

She looked. The stars were bright above the city and shimmered in the river below. But there were other forms in the

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water, she realized: more solid but no less silver. The talk they'd heard on the road was true. Climbing the river were creatures that no fishing boat, however deep it trawled, would ever have found in its nets. Some had a trace of dolphin in them, or squid, or manta ray, but their common trait was a hint of humanity, buried as deep in their past (or future) as their homes were in ocean. There were limbs on some of them, and these few seemed to leap the slope rather than swim it. Others were as sinuous as eels but had heads that carried a mammalian cast, their eyes luminous, their mouths fine enough to make words.

The sight of their ascent was exhilarating, and Jude stayed at the window until the entire shoal had disappeared up the street. She had no doubt of their destination, nor indeed of her own, after this.

"We're as rested as we're ever going to be," she said to Hoi-Polloi.

"So it's time to go up the hill?"

"Yes. I think it is."

They left the Peccable house at dawn in order to make much of the ascent before the comet climbed too high and the humidity sapped their strength. It had never been an easy journey, but even in the cool early morning it became a backbreaking trudge, especially for Jude, who felt as though she were carrying a lead weight in her womb rather than a living soul. She had to call a halt to the climb several times and sit in the shade to catch her breath, but on the fourth such occasion she rose to find her gasps becoming steadily shallower and a pain in her belly so acute she could barely hold on to consciousness. Her agitation—and Hoi-Polloi's yelps—drew helping hands, and she was being lowered onto a knoll of flowering grasses when her waters broke.

A little less than an hour later, not more than half a mile from where the gate of the twin saints Creaze and Even-down had stood, in a grove busy with tiny turquoise birds, she gave birth to the Autarch Sartori's first and only child.

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Though Jude and Hoi-Polloi's pursuers had left the lakemaker in the Kwem with clear directions, they still reached Yzordder six weeks later than the women. This was in part because Monday's sexual appetite was significantly depleted after his liaison in the Kwem Palace, and he set a far less hectic pace than he had hitherto, but more particularly because Gentle's enthusiasm for cartography grew by leaps and bounds. Barely an hour would go by without his remembering some province he'd passed through, or some signpost he'd seen, and whenever he did so the journey was interrupted while he brought out his handmade album of charts and religiously set down the details, rattling off the names of uplands, lowlands,

forests, plains, highways, and cities like a litany while he worked. He wouldn't be hurried, even if the chance of a ride was missed, or a good drenching gained in the process. This was, he told Monday, the true great work of his life, and he only regretted that he'd come to it so late.

These interruptions notwithstanding, the city got closer day by day, mile by mile, until one morning, when they raised their heads from their pillows beneath a hawthorn bush, the mists cleared to show them a vast green mountain in the distance.

"What is that place?" Monday wondered.

Astonished, Gentle said, "Yzordderrex."

"Where's the palace? Where's the streets? All I can see is trees and rainbows."

Gentle was as confounded as the boy. "It used to be gray and black and bloody," he said.

"Well, it's fucking green now."

It got greener the closer they came, the scent of its vegetation so sweetening the air that Monday soon lost his scowl of disappointment and remarked that perhaps this wouldn't be so bad after all. If Yzordderrex had turned into a wildwood, then maybe all the women had become savages,

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dressed in berry juice and smiles. He could suffer that awhile.

What they found on the lower slopes, of course, were scenes more extraordinary than Monday's most heated imaginings. So much of what the inhabitants of the New Yzord-derrex took for granted—the anarchic waters, the primeval trees—left both man and boy agog. They gave up voicing their awe after a time and simply climbed through the lavish thicket, steadily sloughing off the weight of baggage they'd accrued on their journey and leaving it scattered in the grass.

Gentle had intended to go to the Eurhetemec Kesparatein in the hope of locating Athanasius, but with the city so transformed it was a slow and difficult trek, so it was more luck than wit that brought them, after an hour or more, to the gate. The streets beyond it were as overgrown as those they'd come through, the terraces resembling some orchard that had been left to rot, its fallen fruit the rubble that lay between the trees.

At Monday's suggestion, they split up to search for the Maestro, Gentle telling the boy that if he saw Jesus somewhere in the trees then he'd discovered Athanasius. But they both came back to the gate having failed to find him, obliging Gentle to ask some children who'd come to play swinging games on the gate if any of them had seen the man who'd lived here. One of the number, a girl of six or so with her hair so plaited with vines she looked as though she was sprouting them, had an answer.

"He went away," she said.

"Do you know where?"

"Nope," she said again, speaking on behalf of her little tribe.

"Does anybody know?"

"Nope."

Which exchange brought the subject of Athanasius to a swift halt.

"Where now?" Monday asked, as the children returned to their games.

"We follow the water," Gentle replied.

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They began to ascend again, while the comet, which had long since passed its zenith, made the contrary motion. They were both weary now, and the temptation to lie down in some tranquil spot grew with every stride they took. But Gentle insisted they go on, reminding Monday that Hoi-Polloi's bosom would be a far more comfortable place to lay his head than any hummock, and her kisses more invigorating than a dip in any pool. His talk was persuasive, and the boy found an energy Gentle envied, bounding on to clear the way for the Maestro, until they reached the mounds of dark rubble that marked the walls of the palace. Rising from them, the columns from which had once hung an enormous pair of gates were turned to playthings by the waters, which climbed the right pillar in rivulets and threw themselves across the gap in a drizzling arch that squarely struck the top of the left. It was a most beguiling spectacle, and one that claimed Gentle's attention completely, leaving Monday to head between the columns alone.

After a short time his shout came back to fetch Gentle, and it was blissful.

"Boss? Boss! Come here!"

Gentle followed where Monday's cries led, through the warm rain beneath the arch and into the palace itself. He found Monday wading across a courtyard, fragrant with the lilies that trembled on its flood, towards a figure standing beneath the colonnade on the other side. It was Hoi-Polloi. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, as though she'd just swum the pool, and the bosom upon which Monday was so eager to lay his head was bare.

"So you're here at last," she said, looking past Monday towards Gentle.

Her eager beau lost his footing halfway across, and lilies flew as he hauled himself to his feet.

"You knew we were coming?" he said to the girl.

"Of course," she replied. "Not you. But the Maestro. We knew the Maestro was coming."

"But it's *me* you're glad to see, right?" Monday spluttered. "I mean, you *are* glad?"

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She opened her arms to him, "What do you think?" she said.

He whooped his whoop and splashed on towards her, peeling off his soaked shirt as he went. Gentle followed in his wake. By the time he reached the other side Monday was stripped down to his underwear.

"How did you know we were coming here?" Gentle asked the girl.

"There are prophetics everywhere," she said. "Come on. I'll take you up."

"Can't he go on his own?" Monday protested.

"We'll have plenty of time later," Hoi-Polloi said, taking his hand. "But first I have to take him up to the chambers."

The trees within the ring of the demolished walls dwarfed those outside, inspired to unprecedented growth by the almost palpable sanctity of this place. There were women and children in their branches and among their gargantuan roots, but Gentle saw no men here and supposed that if Hoi-Polloi hadn't been escorting them they'd have been asked to leave. How such a request would have been enforced he could only guess, but he didn't doubt that the presences which charged the air and earth here had their ways. He knew what those presences were: the promised Goddesses, whose existence he'd first heard mooted in Beatrice, while sitting in Mother Splendid's kitchen.

The journey was circuitous. There were several places where the rivers ran too hard and deep to be forded, and Hoi-Polloi had to lead them to bridges or stepping stones, then double back along the opposite bank to pick up the track again. But the farther they went, the more sentient they became, and though Gentle had countless questions to ask he kept them to himself rather than display his naivete.

There were tidbits from Hoi-Polloi once in a while, so casually dropped they were enigmas in themselves. "... the fires are so comical..." she said at one point, as they passed a pile of twisted metalwork that had been one of the Auctarch's war machines. And at another place, where a deep blue pool housed fish the size of men, said: "... apparently they have their own city . . . but it's so deep in the ocean I

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don't suppose I'll ever see it. The children will, though. That's what's wonderful...."

Finally, she brought them to a door that was curtained with running water and, turning to Gentle, said, "They're waiting for you."

Monday went to step through the curtain at Gentle's side, but Hoi-Polloi restrained him with a kiss on his neck.

"This is just for the Maestro," she said. "Come along. We'll go swimming."

"Boss?"

"Go ahead," Gentle told him. "No harm's going to come to me here."

"I'll see you later then," Monday said, content to have Hoi-Polloi tug him away.

Before they'd disappeared into the thicket, Gentle turned to the door, dividing the cool curtain with his fingers and stepping into the chamber beyond. After the riot of life outside, both its scale and its austerity came as a shock. It was the first structure he'd seen in the city that preserved something of his brother's lunatic ambition. Its vastness was uninvaded by all but a few shoots and tendrils, and the only waters that ran here were at the door behind him and those falling from an arch at the other end. The Goddesses had

not left the chamber entirely unmarked, however. The walls of what had been built as a windowless hall were now pierced on all sides, so that for all its immensity the place was a honeycomb, penetrated by the soft light of evening. There was only one item of furniture: a chair, close to the distant arch, and seated upon it, with a baby on her lap, was Judith.

As Gentle entered, she looked up from the child's face and smiled at him. "I was beginning to think you'd lost your way," she said.

Her voice was light: almost literally, he thought. When she spoke, the beams that came through the walls flickered,

"I didn't know you were waiting," he said.

"It's been no great hardship," she said. "Won't you come closer?" As he crossed the chamber towards her, she said, "I didn't expect you to follow us at first, but then I

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thought, He will, he will, because he'll want to see the child."

"To be honest... I didn't think about the child."

"Well, she thought about you," Jude said, without rebuke.

The baby in her lap could not be more than a few weeks old but, like the trees and flowers here, was burgeoning. She sat on Jude's lap rather than lay, one small strong hand clutching her mother's long hair. Though Jude's breasts were bare and comfortable, the child had no interest in nourishment or sleep. Her gray eyes were fixed on Gentle, studying him with an intense and quizzical stare.

"How's Clem?" Jude asked when Gentle stood before her.

"He was fine when I last saw him. But I left rather suddenly, as you know. I feel rather guilty about that. But once I'd started ..."

"I know. There was no turning back. It was the same for me."

Gentle went down on his haunches in front of Jude and offered his hand, palm up, to the child. She grasped it instantly.

"What's her name?" he said.

"I hope you won't mind ..."

"What?"

"I called her Huzzah."

Gentle smiled up at Jude. "You did?" Then back to the baby, called by her scrutiny: "Huzzah?" he said, leaning his face towards hers. "Huzzah. I'm Gentle."

"She knows who you are," Jude said, without a trace of doubt. "She knew about this room before it even

existed. And she knew you'd come here, sooner or later."

Gentle didn't inquire as to how the child had shared her knowledge. It was just one more mystery to add to the catalogue in this extraordinary place.

"And the Goddesses?" he said.

"What about them?"

"They don't mind that she's Sartori's child?"

"Not at all," Jude said, her voice daintier at the mention

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of Sartori. "The whole city... the whole city's here to prove how good can come from bad."

"She's better than good, Jude," Gentle said.

She smiled, and so did the child. "Yes, she is."

Huzzah was reaching for Gentle's face, ready to topple from Jude's lap in pursuit of her object.

"I think she sees her father," Jude said, lifting the child back into the crook of her arm and standing up.

Gentle also stood, watching Jude carry Huzzah to a litter of playthings on the ground. The child pointed and gurgled.

"Do you miss him?" he said.

"I did in the Fifth," Jude replied, her back still turned while she picked up Huzzah's chosen toy. "But I don't here. Not since Huzzah. I never felt quite real till she appeared. I was a figment of the other Judith." She stood up again, turning to Gentle. "You know I still can't really remember all those missing years? I get snatches of them once in awhile, but nothing solid. I suppose I was living in a dream. But she's woken me, Gentle." Jude kissed the baby's cheek. "She's made me real. I was only a copy until her. We both were. He knew it and I knew it. But we made something new." She sighed. "I don't miss him," she said. "But I wish he could have seen her. Just once. Just so he could have known what it was to be real too."

She started to cross back to the chair, but the child reached out for Gentle again, letting out a little cry to emphasize her wishes.

"My, my," Jude said. "You *are* popular."

She sat down again and put the toy she'd picked up in front of Huzzah. It was a small blue stone.

"Here, darling," she cooed. "Look. What's this? What's this?"

Gurgling with pleasure, the child claimed the plaything from her mother's finger with a dexterity far beyond her tender age. The gurgles became chuckles, as she laid it to her lips, as if to kiss it.

"She likes to laugh," Gentle said.

"She does, thank God. Oh, now listen to me. Still thank?ing God."

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"Old habits ..."

"That one'll die," Jude said firmly.

The child was putting the toy to her mouth.

"No, sweetie, don't do that," Jude said. Then, to Gentle: "Do you think the Erasure'll decay eventually? I have a friend here called Lotti; she says it will. It'll decay, and then we'll have to live with the stench from the First every time the wind comes that way."

"Maybe a wall could be built."

"By whom? Nobody wants to go near the place."

"Not even the Goddesses?"

"They've got their work here. And in the Fifth, They want to free the waters there too."

"That should be quite a sight."

"Yes, it should. Maybe I'll go back for that,"

Huzzah's laughter had subsided during this exchange, and she was once again studying Gentle, reaching up towards him from her mother's lap. This time her tiny hand was not open but clutching the blue stone.

"I think she wants you to have it," Jude said.

He smiled at the child and said, "Thank you. But you should keep it."

Her gaze became more intent at this, and he was certain she understood every word he was saying. Her hand still proffered its gift, determined he should take it.

"Go on," Jude said.

As much at the behest of the eyes as at Jude's words, Gentle reached down and gingerly took the stone from Huzzah's hand. There was some considerable strength in her. The stone was heavy: heavy and cool.

"Now our peace is really made," Jude said.

"I didn't know we'd been at war," Gentle replied.

"That's the worst kind, isn't it?" Jude said. "But it's over now. It's over forever."

There was a subtle modulation in the plush of the water-curtained arch behind her, and she glanced around. Her expression had been grave, but when she looked back at Gentle she had a smile on her

face.

"I have to go," she said as she stood.

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The child was chuckling and clutching the air.

"Will I see you again?" Gentle said.

Jude shook her head slowly, looking at him almost indulgently.

"What for?" she murmured. "We've said all we have to say. We've forgiven each other. It's finished."

"Will I be allowed to stay in the city?"

"Of course," she said with a little laugh. "But why would you want to?"

"Because I've come to the end of the pilgrimage."

"Have you?" she said, turning from him to pad towards the arch. "I thought you had one Dominion left."

"I've seen it. I know what's there."

There was a pause. Then Jude said, "Did Celestine ever tell you her story? She did, didn't she?"

"The one about Nisi Nirvana?"

"Yes. She told it to me too, the night before the Reconciliation. Did you understand it?"

"Not really."

"Ah."

"Why?"

"It's just that I didn't either, and I thought maybe . . ." She shrugged. "I don't know what I thought."

She was at the archway now, and the child was peering over her shoulder at somebody who'd appeared behind the veil of water. The visitor was not, Gentle thought, quite human.

"Hoi-Polloi mentioned our other guests, did she?" Jude said, seeing his astonishment. "They came up out of the ocean, to woo us." She smiled. "Beautiful, some of them. There's going to be such children...."

The smile faltered, just a little.

"Don't be sad, Gentle," she said. "We had our time."

Then she turned from him and took the child through the curtain. He heard Huzzah laugh to see the face that awaited them on the other side, and saw its owner put his silvery arms around mother and child. Then

the light in his eyes brightened, running in the curtain, and when it dimmed the family had gone.

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Gentle waited in the empty chamber for several minutes, knowing Jude wasn't going to come back, not even certain that he wanted her to but unable to depart until he had fixed in his memory all that had passed between them. Only then did he return to the door and step out into the evening air. There was a different kind of enchantment in the wildwood now. Soft blue mists drooped from the canopy and crept up from the pools. The mellifluous songs of dusk birds had replaced those of noon, and the busy drone of pollinators had given way to breath-wing moths.

He looked for Monday but failed to find him, and although there was nobody to prevent his loitering in this idyll, he felt ill at ease. This was not his place now. By day it was too full of life, and by night, he guessed, too full of love. It was a new experience for him to feel so utterly immaterial. Even on the road, hanging back from the fires while nonsense tales were told, he'd always known that if he'd simply opened his mouth and identified himself he would have been feted, encircled, adored. Not so here. Here he was nothing: nothing and nobody. There were new growths, new mysteries, new marriages.

Perhaps his feet understood that better than his head, because before he'd properly confessed his redundancy to himself they were already carrying him away, out under the water-clad arches and down the slope of the city. He didn't head towards the delta but towards the desert, and though he'd not seen the purpose in this journey when Jude had hinted at it, he didn't now deny his feet their passage.

When he'd last emerged from the gate that led out into the desert he'd been carrying Pie, and there'd been a throng of refugees around them. Now he was alone, and though he had no other weight to carry besides his own, he knew the trek ahead of him would exhaust what little sum of will was left to him. He wasn't much concerned at this. If he perished on the way, it scarcely mattered. Whatever Jude had said, his pilgrimage was at an end.

As he reached the crossroads where he'd encountered Floccus Dado, he heard a shout behind him and turned to see a bare-chested Monday galloping towards him through

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the dwindling light, mounted on a mule, or a striped variation thereof.

"What were you doing, going without me?" he demanded when he reached Gentle's side.

"I looked for you, but you weren't around. I thought you'd gone off to start a family with Hoi-Polloi."

"Nah!" said Monday. "She's got funny ideas, that girl. She said she wanted to introduce me to some fish. I said I wasn't too keen on fish, 'cause the bones get stuck in your throat. Well, that's right, innit? People choke on fish, regular. Anyhow, she looks at me like I just farted and says maybe I should go with you after all. An' I said, I didn't even know you was leaving. So she finds me this ugly little fuck"—he slapped the hybrid's flank—"an* points me in this direction." He glanced back at the city. "I think we're well out of there," he said, dropping his voice. "There was too much water, if you ask me. D'you see it at the gate? A great fuckin' fountain."

"No, I didn't. That must be recent."

"See? The whole place is going to drown. Let's get thefuck out of here. Hop on."

"What's the beast called?"

"Tolland," Monday said with a grin. "Which way are weheaded?"

Gentle pointed towards the horizon.

"I don't see nothin'."

"Then that must be the right direction."

4

Ever the pragmatist, Monday hadn't left the city withoutsupplies. He'd made a sack of his shirt and filled it to burst? ing with succulent fruits, and it was these that sustainedthem as they traveled. They didn't halt when night came, but kept up their steady pace, taking turns to walk beside the beast so as not to exhaust it and giving it at least as muchof the fruit as they ate themselves, plus the piths, cores, andskins of their own portions.

Monday slept much of the time that he rode, but Gentle,

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despite his fatigue, remained wide awake, too vexed by the problem of how he was going to set this wasteland down in his book of maps to indulge himself in slumber. The stone Huzzah had given him was constantly in his hand, coaxingso much sweat from his pores that several times a little pool gathered in the cup of his palm. Discovering this, he would put the stone away, only to find a few minutes later thathe'd taken it out of his pocket without even realizing thathe'd done so, and his fingers were once again making playwith it.

Now and then he'd cast a backward glance towardsYzordderrex, and it made quite a sight, the benighted flanksof the city glittering in countless places, as though the wa?ters in its streets had become perfect mirrors for the stars.Nor was Yzordderrex the only source of such splendor. The land between the gates of the city and the track that they were following also gleamed here and there, catching itsown fragments of the sky's display.

But all such enchantments were gone by the first sign ofdawn. The city had long since disappeared into the distancebehind them, and the thunderheads in front were lowering.Gentle recognized the baleful color of this sky from theglimpse he and Tick Raw had snatched of the First, Though the Erasure still sealed Hapexamendios' pestilence fromthe Second, its taint was too persuasive to be obliterated,and the bruisy heavens loomed vaster as they traveled, lyingalong the entire horizon and climbing to their zenith.

There was some good news, however: they weren'talone. As the wretched remains of the Dearthers' tents ap? peared on the horizon, so too did a congregation of God spotters, thirty or so, watching the Erasure. One of them saw Gentle and Monday approaching, and word of their ar?rival passed through the small crowd until it reached onewho instantly pelted in the travelers' direction.

"Maestro! Maestro!" he yelled as he came.

It was Chicka Jackeen, of course, and he was in a fair ec?stasy to see Gentle, though after the initial

flood of greetings the talk became grim.

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"What did we do wrong, Maestro?" he wanted to know. "This isn't the way it was meant to be, is it?"

Gentle did his weary best to explain, astonishing and appalling Chicka Jackeen by turns.

"So Hapexamendios is dead?"

"Yes, he is. And everything in the First is His body. And it's rotting to high heaven."

"What happens when the Erasure decays?"

"Who knows? I'm afraid there's enough rot to stink out the Dominion."

"So what's your plan?" Chicka Jackeen wanted to know.

"I don't have one."

The other looked confounded at this. "But you came all the way here," he said. "You must have had some notion or other."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Gentle replied, "but the truth is, this was the only place left for me to go." He stared at the Erasure. "Hapexamendios was my Father, Lucius. Perhaps in my heart of hearts I believe I should be in the First with Him."

"If you don't mind me saying so, boss—" Monday broke in.

"Yes?"

"That's a bloody stupid idea."

"If you're going to go in, so am I," Chicka Jackeen said. "I want to see for myself. A dead God's something to tell your children about, eh?"

"Children?"

"Well," said Jackeen, "it's either that or write my memoirs, and I haven't got the patience for that."

"You?" Gentle said. "You waited two hundred years for me, and you say you haven't got patience?"

"Not any more," came the reply. "I want a life, Maestro."

"I don't blame you."

"But not before I've seen the First."

They'd reached the Erasure by now, and while Chicka Jackeen went among his colleagues to tell them what he and

the Reconciler were going to do, Monday once again piped up with his opinion on the venture.

"Don't do it, boss," he said. "You've got nothing to prove. I know you were pissed off that they didn't throw apart in Yzordderrex, but fuck 'em, I say—or, rather, don't. Let 'em have their fish."

Gentle laid his hands on Monday's shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "This isn't a suicide mission."

"So what's the big hurry? You're dead beat, boss. Have a sleep. Eat something. Get strong. There's all of tomorrow not touched yet."

"I'm fine," Gentle said. "I've got my talisman."

"What's that?"

Gentle opened his palm and showed Monday the blue

stone.

"A fuckin' egg?"

"An egg, eh?" Gentle said, tossing the stone in his hand. "Maybe it is."

He threw it up into the air a second time, and it rose, far higher than his muscle had propelled it, way up above their heads. At the summit of its ascent it seemed to hover for a beat and then returned into his hand at leisure, defying the claim of gravity. As it descended it brought the faintest drizzle down with it, cooling their upturned faces.

Monday cooed with pleasure. "Rain out of nowhere," he said. "I remember that."

Gentle left him bathing the grime from his face and went to join Chicka Jackeen, who had finished explaining his intentions to his colleagues. They all hung back, watching the Maestros with uneasy stares.

"They think we're going to die," Chicka Jackeen explained.

"They may very well be right," Gentle said quietly. "Are you certain you want to come with me?"

"I was never more certain of anything."— With that they started towards the ambiguous ground that lay between the solidity of the Second and the Era's sure's vacancy. As they went, one of Jackeen's friends began to call after him, in distress at his departure. The cry

was taken up by several others, their shouts too mingled to be interpreted. Jackeen halted for a moment and glanced back towards the company he was leaving. Gentle made no attempt to urge him on. He ignored the shouts and picked up his speed, the Erasure thickening around him and the smell of the devastation that lay on the other side growing stronger with every step he took. He was prepared for it, however. Instead of holding his breath, he drew the stench of his Father's rot deep into his lungs, defying

its pungency. There was another shout from behind him, but this time it wasn't one of Jackeen's friends, it was the Maestro himself, his voice colored more by wonder than alarm. Its tone piqued Gentle's curiosity, and he glanced back over his shoulder to seek Jackeen out, but the nullity had come between them. Unwilling to be delayed, Gentle forged on, a purpose in his stride he didn't comprehend. His enfeebled legs had found strength from somewhere; his heart was urgent in his chest.

Ahead, the blinding murk was stirring, the first vague forms of the First's terrain emerging. And from behind, Jackeen again.

"Maestro? Maestro! Where are you?"

Without slowing his stride, Gentle returned the call.

"Here!"

"Wait for me!" Jackeen gasped. "Wait!" He emerged from the void to lay his hand on Gentle's shoulder.

"What is it?" Gentle said, looking around at Jackeen, who as if in bliss had dropped the toll of years and was once again a young man, sweaty with awe at the way of feits.

"The waters," he said.

"What about them?"

"They've followed you, Maestro. They've followed you!"

And as he spoke, they came. Oh, how they came! They ran to Gentle's feet in glittering rills that broke against his ankles and his shins and leapt like silver snakes towards his hands—or, rather, towards the stone he held in his hands. And seeing their elation and their zeal, he heard Huzzah's slaughter and felt again her tiny fingers brushing his arm as

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she passed the blue egg on to him. He didn't doubt for a moment that she'd known what would come of the gift. So, most likely, had Jude. He'd become their agent at the last, just as he'd become his mother's, and the thought of that sweet service brought an echo of the child's laughter to his lips.

From above, the egg was calling down a drizzle to swell the waters swirling underfoot, and in the space of seconds the patter became a roar, and a deluge descended, violent enough to sluice the murk of the Erasure out of the air. After a few moments, light began to break around the Maestros, the first light this terrain had seen since Hapexamen-dios had drawn the void over his Dominion. By it, Gentle saw that Jackeen's exhilaration was rapidly turning to panic.

"We're going to drown!" he yelled, fighting to stay on his feet as the water deepened.

Gentle didn't retreat. He knew where his duty lay. As the surf broke against their backs, the tide threatening to drag them under, he raised Huzzah's gift to his lips and kissed it, just as she had done. Then he mustered all his strength and threw the stone out, over the landscape that was being uncovered before them. The egg went from his hand with a momentum that was not his sinews' work but its own ambition,

and instantly the waters went in pursuit of it, dividing around the Maestros and taking their tides off into the wasteland of the First.

It would take the waters weeks, perhaps even months, to cover the Dominion from end to end, and most of that work would go unwitnessed. But in the next few hours, standing at their vantage point where the City of God had once begun, the Maestros were granted a glimpse of their labor. The clouds above the First, which had been as inert as the landscape beneath, now began to churn and roil and shed their anguish in stupendous storms, which in turn swelled the rivers that were driving their cleansing way across the rot.

Hapexamendios' remains were not despised. With the

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purpose of the Goddesses fueling their every drop, the waters turned the slaughterhouse over and over and over, scouring the matter of its poisons and sweeping it up into mounds, which the exhilarated air festooned with vapors.

The first ground that appeared from this tumult was close to the feet of the Maestros and rapidly became a ragged peninsula that stretched fully a mile into the Dominion. The waters broke against it constantly, bringing with every wave another freight of Hapexamendios' clay to increase its flanks. Gentle was patient for a time and stayed at the border. But he could not resist the invitation forever, and finally, ignoring Jackeen's words of caution, he set off down the spine of land to better see the spectacle visible from the far end. The waters were still draining from the new earth, and here and there lightning still ran on the slopes, but the ground was solid enough, and there were seedlings everywhere, carried, he presumed, from Yzordderrex. If so, there would be abundant life here in a little while.

By the time he'd reached the end of the peninsula the clouds overhead were beginning to clear somewhat, lighter for their furies. Farther off, of course, the process he'd been privileged to witness was just beginning, as the storm spread in all directions from their point of origin. By their blazes he glimpsed the snaking rivers, going about their work with undiminished ambition. Here on the promontory, however, there was a more benign light. The First Dominion had a sun, it seemed, and though it wasn't yet warm, Gentle didn't wait for balmy weather to begin his last labors, but took his album and his pen from his jacket and sat down on the marshy headland to work. He still had the map of the desert between the gates of Yzordderrex and the Era sure to set down, and though these pages would doubtless be the barest in the album, they had to be drawn all the more carefully for that fact: he wanted their very sparseness to have a beauty of its own.

After perhaps an hour of concentrated work he heard Jackeen behind him. First a footfall, then a question:

"Speaking in tongues, Maestro?"

Gentle hadn't even been aware of the inventory he was

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rattling off until his attention was drawn to it: a seamless list of names that must have been incomprehensible to anyone other than himself, the stopping places of his pilgrimage, as familiar to his tongue as his many names.

"Are you sketching the new world?" Jackeen asked him, hesitating to come too close to the artist while he worked.

"No, no," said Gentle, "I'm finishing a map." He paused, then corrected himself. "No, not finishing. Starting."

"May I look?"

"If you like."

Jackeen went down on his haunches behind Gentle and peered over his shoulder. The pages that depicted the desert were as complete as Gentle could make them. He was now attempting to delineate the peninsula he was sitting on, and something of the scene in front of him. It would be little more than a line or two, but it was a beginning.

"I wonder, would you fetch Monday for me?"

"Is there something you need?"

"Yes, I want him to take these maps back into the Fifth with him and give them to Clem."

"Who's Clem?"

"An angel."

"Ah."

"Would you bring him here?"

"Now?"

"If you would," Gentle said. "I'm almost done."

Ever dutiful, Jackeen stood up and started back toward the Second, leaving Gentle to work on. There was very little left to do. He finished making his crude rendering of the promontory; then he added a line of dots along it to mark his path and at the headland placed a small cross at the spot where he was sitting. That done, he went back through the album, to be certain that the pages were in proper order. It occurred to him as he did so that he'd fashioned a self-portrait. Like its maker, the map was flawed but, he hoped, redeemable: a rudimentary thing that might see finer versions in the fullness of time; be made and remade and made again, perhaps forever.

He was about to set the album down beside the pen when he heard a hint of coherence in the surf that was beating against the slope below. Unable to quite make sense of the sound, he ventured to the edge. The ground was too newly made to be solid and threatened to crumble away beneath his weight, but he peered over as far as he could, and what he saw and what he heard were enough to make him retreat from the edge, kneel down in the dirt, and with trembling hands start scribbling a message to accompany the maps.

It was necessarily brief. He could hear the words clearly now, rising from the surge of waves. They distracted him with promises.

"Nisi Nirvana," they said, "*Nisi Nirvana*, ..."

By the time he'd finished his note, laid down the album and the pen beside it, and returned to the edge of the promontory, the sun of this Dominion was emerging from the storm clouds overhead to shed its light on the waves below. The beams placated them for a time, soothing their frenzy and piercing them, so that Gentle had a glimpse of the ground they were moving over. It was not, it seemed, another sky, and in it was a sphere so majestic that to his eyes all the bodies in the heavens of the Imajica—all stars, all moons, all noontime suns—could not in their sum have touched its glory. Here was the door that this Father's city had been built to seal, the door through which his mother's name in fable had been whispered. It had been closed for millennia, but now it stood open, and through it a music of voices was rising, going on its way to every wandering spirit in Imajica and calling them home to rapture.

In its midst was a voice Gentle knew, and before he'd even glimpsed its source his mind had shaped the face that called him, and his body felt the arms that would wrap him around and bear him up. Then they were there—those arms, that face—rising from the door to claim him, and he needed to imagine them no longer. "Are you finished?" he was asked. "Yes," he replied. "I'm finished."

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"Good," said Pie 'oh' pah, smiling. "Then we can begin."

The congregation Chicka Jackeen had left at the perimeter of the First had steadily begun to venture along the peninsula as their courage and curiosity grew. Monday was of course among them, and Jackeen was just about to call the boy and summon him to the Reconciler's side when Monday let out a cry of his own, pointing back along the promontory. Jackeen turned and fixed his eyes—as did they all—on the two figures standing on the headland, embracing. Later there would be much discussion between these witnesses as to what they'd actually seen. All agreed that one of the pair was the Maestro Sartori. As to the other, opinions differed widely. Some said they saw a woman, others a man, still others a cloud with a piece of sun burning in it. But whatever these ambiguities, what followed was not in doubt. Having embraced, the two figures advanced to the limit of the promontory, where they stepped out into the air and were gone.

Two weeks later, on the penultimate day of a cheerless December, Clem was sitting in front of the fire in the dining room of number 28, a spot from which he'd seldom risen since Christmas, when he heard a hectic beating on the front door. He was not wearing a watch—what did time matter now?—but he assumed it was long after midnight. Anyone calling at such an hour was likely to be either desperate or dangerous, but in his present bleak mood he scarcely cared what harm might await him in the street outside. There was nothing left for him here: in this house, in this life. Gentle had gone, Judy had gone, and so, most recently, had Tay. It was five days since he'd heard his lover whisper his name.

"Clem ... I have to go."

"Go?" he'd replied. "Where to?"

"Somebody opened the door," came Tay's reply. "The dead are being called home. I have to go."

They wept together for a while, tears pouring from

Clem's eyes while the sound of Tay's anguish racked him from within. But there was no help for it. The call had come, and though Tay was grief-stricken at the thought of parting from Clem, his existence between conditions had become unbearable, and beneath the sorrow of parting was the joyful knowledge of imminent release. Their strange union was over. It was time for the living and the dead to part.

Clem hadn't known what loss really was until Tay left. The pain of losing his lover's physical body had been acute enough, but losing the spirit that had so miraculously returned to him was immeasurably worse. It was not possible, he thought, to be emptier than this and still be a living being. Several times during those dark days he'd wondered if he should simply kill himself and hope he would be able to follow his lover through whatever door now stood open. That he didn't was more a consequence of the responsibility he felt than from lack of courage. He was the only witness to the miracles of Gamut Street left in this Dominion. If he departed, who would there be to tell the tale?

But such imperatives seemed frail things at an hour like this, and as he rose from the fire and crossed to the front door, he allowed himself the thought that if these midnight callers came with death in their hands perhaps he would not refuse it. Without asking who was on the other side, he slid back the bolts and opened the door. To his surprise he discovered Monday standing in the driving sleet. Beside him stood a shivering stranger, his thinning curls flattened to his skull.

"This is Chicka Jackeen," Monday said as he hauled his sodden guest over the threshold. "Jackie, this is Clem, eighth wonder of the world. Well, am I too wet to get a hug?"

Clem opened his arms to Monday, who embraced him with fervor.

"I thought you and Gentle had gone forever," Clem said.

"Well, one of us has," came the reply.

"I guessed as much," Clem said. "Tay went after him. And the revenants too."

"When was this?"

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"Christmas Day."

Jackeen's teeth were chattering, and Clem ushered him through to the fire, which he had been fueling with sticks of furniture. He threw on a couple of chair legs and invited Jackeen to sit by the blaze to thaw out. The man thanked him and did so. Monday, however, was made of sterner stuff. Availing himself of the whisky that sat beside the hearth, he put several mouthfuls into his system, then set about clearing the room, explaining as he dragged the table into the corner that they needed some working space. With the floor cleared, he opened his jacket and pulled Gentle's gazetteer from beneath his arm, dropping it in front of Clem.

"What's this?"

"It's a map of the Imajica," Monday said.

"Gentle's work?"

"Yep."

Monday went down on his haunches and flipped the album open, taking out the loose leaves and handing the cover back up to Clem.

"He wrote a message in it," Monday said.

While Clem read the few words Gentle had scribbled on the cover, Monday began to arrange the sheets side by side on the floor, carefully aligning them so that the maps became an unbroken flow. As he worked, he talked, his enthusiasm as unalloyed as ever.

"You know what he wants us to do, don't you? He wants us to draw this map on every fuckin' wall we can find! On the pavements! On our foreheads! Anywhere and everywhere."

"That's quite a task," said Clem.

"I'm here to help you," Chicka Jackeen said. "In whatever capacity I can."

He got up from the fire and came to stand beside Clem, where he could admire the pattern that was emerging on the floor in front of them.

"That's not the only thing you've come to do, is it?" Monday said. "Be honest."

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"Well, no," said Jackeen. "I'd also like to find myself a wife. But that will have to wait."

"Damn right!" said Monday. "*This* is our business now."

He stood up and stepped out of the circle which the pages of Gentle's album had formed. Here was the Imajica, or rather the tiny part of it which the Reconciler had seen: Patashoqua and Vanaeph; Beatrix and the mountains of the Jokalaylau; Mai-ke, the Cradle, L'Himby, and the Kwem; the Lenten Way, the delta, and Yzordderrex. And then the crossroads outside the city, and the desert beyond, with a single track leading to the borders of the Second Dominion. On the other side of that border, the pages were practically empty. The wanderer had sketched the peninsula he'd sat on, but beyond it he'd simply written: *This is a new world.*

"And this," said Jackeen, stooping to indicate the cross at the end of the promontory, "is where the Maestro's pilgrimage ended."

"Is that where he's buried?" Clem said.

"Oh, no," Jackeen said. "He's gone to places that'll make this life seem like a dream. He's left the circle, you see."

"No, I don't," said Clem. "If he's left the circle, then where's he gone? Where have they *all* gone?"

"Into it," Jackeen said.

Clem began to smile.

"May I?" said Jackeen, rising and claiming from Clem's fingers the sheet which carried Gentle's last message.

My friends, he'd written, *Pie is here. I am found. Will you show these pages to the world, so that every wanderer may find their way home?*

"I think our duty is plain, gentlemen," Jackeen said. He stooped again to lay the final page in the middle of the circle, marking the place of spirits to which the Reconciler had gone. "And when we've done that duty, we have here the map that will show us where we must go. We'll follow him. There's nothing more certain. We'll all of us follow him, by and by."