

Godfather Death

by Richard Bowes

Death's Transept

One morning in a May well into the twentieth century, three Ranger cadets in their dress blues stood at parade rest waiting to make the jump into Time. Behind them was the airfield where students at the Academy were taught to fly. Across the road were the hills and obstacle courses where they learned to drive. Above them flew banners bearing the gold lyre of Apollo.

Navigation instructor Sophia Cortubas gave the three a brief glance. Cadets Nancy Kane, Ed Brown, and Jake Stockley, all white Americans in their mid-teens, all big and somewhat interchangeable.

Cortubas guessed that this wasn't an accident. Twenty years in the service of the God of Reason had taught her to see design in all things. She snapped out a set of coordinates, watched the cadets twist the spiral rings all Rangers wear. Cortubas looked around and paused. A Piper Cub was rolling down the runway. A convoy of vehicles driven by cadets was about to top a steep rise.

An experienced wayfarer can hop into the Time Stream on the strength of a breeze. In a pinch, a veteran like Sophia Cortubas needs nothing more than the childhood memory of a sailboat on the blue Aegean.

But because these were trainees, the instructor waited until the plane was in the air and the motor vehicles were heading downhill. Riding their velocity like it was a wave, Cortubas turned and slipped into Time.

Their destination was the Transept of Death which floats like an island in the Time Stream. The cadets knew this was a test. At Ranger Academy, everything is. As their teacher walked out of the world, they breathed deep, whistled between their teeth and followed her.

Because it was a test, Sophia Cortubas did not look back. But because these were cadets and not Rangers, she set a moderate course, made the trip in stages.

She stood for a moment beside railroad tracks on an East African veldt until she heard them exhale behind her. She waited on a rocky beach where a distant flotilla of whaling ships floated under the light of the moon. When the first foot of ground behind her, she was off again.

Ranger Cortubas emerged from Time in an underground passage and went up a flight of checkerboard tile stairs. Down at the top swung open. The three scrambled after her. And stood open-mouthed.

The Transept is vast, the roof a distant glass dome, the gray marble floor a football field. From the far ends, sunlight pours down through hundred foot tall glass windows.

The Transept of Death is where those gather who have yet to die, but who have business with Death. They are the friends and lovers and relatives and advocates of those who are gone. They have come to plead with Death, to outwit, to trifle with, to charm the Ultimate Lord.

Around the Ranger and her cadets moved lawyers in wigs and doctors in lab coats, mullahs in caftans and priestesses wearing wings of gold. A woman in full white mourning led six children who sleep-walked in their pajamas.

Cortubas led her charges across the floor. Then she said, "Wait here," and disappeared into the crowd. Sixteen and the cadets at first stood straddle-legged and slit eyed.

Then, they saw the flight of wide stairs that lead to huge, bronze doors adorned with hour glasses and cornucopias. On one door, nubile Persephone held a pomegranate. On the other, hooded Pluto drove his chariot.

"The Gate of Sighs," said Nancy Kane softly and the three goggled like yokels. Anyone who sets out on the Time Line hears stories about deals and bargains that have opened those doors. For through the Gate of Sighs emerge those mortals who have died and been restored to life.

The cadets forgot their training so completely that they didn't notice that they were being observed. A tall brown skinned man, dressed all in gray, stood nearby and watched each in turn. He looked at the graceful girl with a touch of wonder. He smiled almost affectionately at Jake Shockley and gazed long and hard at Ed Brown.

Then he said, "Servants of Apollo," and spread his arms, smiling. "I'm Ted Daw. Welcome to my Godfather's house."

The three stared at him. Then Nancy repeated the start of a tale they'd all heard. "A poor man went looking for a god-parent for his son."

"It's true," Ted Daw replied. "My father shopped me around. Went to every power of Earth and Time. Apollo was upright. The Mother too devious. Mercury couldn't be found. Mars had more godchildren than he could count. Athena a pedant and Bacchus a drunk. Venus would have made me grow wings. As dad told it to me, the choice was obvious. Death treats us all alike."

"They say, Death came to your christening," Jake said.

"Danced with all and sundry, I'm told," said Ted Daw. "That's my story. How did you three happen to serve Lord Apollo?"

"Where I was a kid in the 1990s, every day there was news of another place burning up," Nancy told him. "But some people whispered that there was a way out called the Rangers."

"After the Great War in 1907 nobody had anything," said Jake. "My parents were farmers with ten kids. When strangers came asking about one of the younger ones, my folks signed me over."

"I was dumb enough to fall into the Time Stream," said Ed Brown, looking hard-eyed at the Godson. "And lucky enough to get fished out by the Rangers."

"Servants of Life!" said Death's godson. "I admire you more than I can say."

What sounded like a huge hammer hit what must have been a gigantic anvil. All eyes turned to the Gate of Sighs. The hammer rang again. The bronze doors began to part. The crowd caught its breath.

On the third ring, the doors were thrown wide. Still blank-eyed, shocked at death and its aftermath, a lovely woman stepped back into life. She wore a robe of gold-embroidered blue silk and had her hair powdered white in the eighteenth Century manner. Grey-clad attendants bore her luggage.

A voice announced, "Lady Olivia Wexford."

Some in the crowd reacted to the name. Lady Olivia, was a legend along the Stream, a famous beauty who encountered Lord Riot on a summer afternoon in a 1759. As she strolled in her gardens, drums suddenly beat like hearts, pipes wailed the air was choked with the scent of crushed grapes, the musk of wolves and leopards. Lord Riot was the name Dionysus assumed in that time. He had on nothing but the leaves in his hair. And Olivia Wexford looked right into his eyes.

"They rampaged in the garden all that day and night," said Nancy. "Then they went forth at the head of a mob of Bacchae and turned England to bloody ruin."

Ed Brown said, "Now Death gives her back so she can do it again."

Jake, amazed, turned to ask Ted Daw how this could be. But Death's Godson was gone.

"Cortubas wants us!" Nancy said. Their teacher was on the stairs, her hand extended to Lady Olivia. When the cadets arrived, the two women stood on the Transept floor. The attendants had put down the luggage and withdrawn.

Lady Olivia had regained her composure. "An unexpected further episode in the long calamity that is my existence," she said and laughed.

The cadets stood at attention as Sophia Cortubas introduced each by name. They stared wide-eyed at the woman who would lead a million wild Bacchae through Europe and into Asia.

Lady Wexford paid no attention. "I assume the servants of the Lord of Reason know where I am to go and have the means of getting me there."

"Yes, My Lady," Ranger Cortubas said. "Cadets, fall in." She indicated the luggage. "Pick 'em up. Tote 'em out."

"Some not only take it with them, they even get to bring it back," whispered Ed as they hauled suitcases.

"Death's Godson there, Teddy Boy, must figure she's good for business." muttered Jake.

"Silence on duty," ordered Ranger Cortubas who had been listening.

Death Goes Dogging Everywhere

On a July afternoon one 1957, a young couple stepped off the express trolley at a stop on the Milwaukee Inner Suburban Ring. Holding hands, wearing shorts and sandals, tanned but not spectacularly so, they were a nice looking pair.

Exact age is hard to fix for those who travel the Time Stream. But twenty would be a good estimate for Nancy Karver and Ed Brown that day.

Any casual observer might have guessed they were college kids. A slightly regimented look to their dress and bearing could mean they were doing a few months of their National Service as summer interns. So ordinary were they, that nobody noticed they had appeared out of thin air moments before.

In fact, both were Time Rangers who had already served their first assignments. Nancy had done well. Ed had triumphed. Old friends from the Academy, it amused them to pose as young lovers.

They paused and took their bearings. The shopping blocks near the trolley were vaguely Tudor style. As they walked, those gave way to nicely designed duplexes and rows of two-story town houses interspersed with trees and swaths of green playgrounds full of kids. They saw few motor vehicles and many bikes.

"A totally planned world," Nancy murmured. "Not a blade of grass out of place. On its own little inlet in the Time Stream."

"All is calm reason when Apollo runs a place," said Ed Brown. "No World Wars. No Great Depression. No A-bombs. The only thing people die of here is boredom. "

"Doesn't sound that bad."

"A hothouse world. High maintenance. Survives only because the Rangers give it constant attention."

Nancy smiled, "John Dawson, AKA Jack Daw likes it well enough to settle here and sell insurance."

"A mighty tame early retirement for Black Jack Daw after all those years of being Death's man along this stretch of Time Stream.."

"A really good place to raise a kid, though," she said. "Here we are." They stopped in front of a two story duplex.

The boy who answered the bell was about ten years old. Like every other kid around, he was barefoot and wore a Milwaukee Braves cap.

"Hi," said Ed Brown. "Is your dad home?"

"Yes. And he told me to show you upstairs."

Jack Dawson's office was a spare bedroom with a wooden desk and swivel chair, a map of Wisconsin on the wall, cabinet. Dawson was a trim, tough African-American who was quite dark and looked about forty. He wore glasses, gray slacks and tie and a blue shirt.

He rose to shake hands and wave Ed Brown to a chair "To what do I owe this surprise visit from the servants of Apollo?"

"Your kid said you were expecting us."

"Sometimes it's hard not to skip ahead in the story. Don't Rangers do that?"

"Not usually. Time paradoxes and all that. So you know what I'm here to ask."

"Cop stuff. I don't need to spot ahead for that. You're going to ask what I'm doing here. Because deep down inside Rangers think that Lord Pluto is some kind of gangland boss. In fact, Death commits no crimes. He gets us all. The only questions for us mortals are when and how. And he already knows that."

"So. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here, Ranger Brown, for the same reason you and your partner are. My kid." He gestured toward the window. Outside, children of many shades ran on the grass, rolled in a tangle of limbs.

"On this world when I walk with my son, I don't see the expressions on peoples' faces as they think to themselves, 'my boy's mother was white!'"

"We had wondered about the mother."

Jack Daw rolled his eyes. "You mean there's something the Rangers don't know? His mother died shortly after he was born. I'll get you the papers if you like."

"Death seems to have taken a special interest in your kid."

"Served as Teddy's godfather. Big honor. Does that for only a few mortals per generation."

"And from among them he chooses his surrogate. We both know who that turns out to be."

Said Jack Daw, "I'd like the Rangers to let him figure that out for himself, let him get as much childhood as possible." He rose from his desk. "We won't be around here for very long. I wanted Teddy to see this world. It's a nice place. Not a realistic one. But I'm grateful to Lord Apollo for having the idea."

He reached for the blazer on the coat rack beside him. "We've given Teddy a few minutes with your partner. He and

will walk you back to the station. The kid admires the Rangers. Wants to be one."

Teddy told Nancy Kane, "I'm not supposed to talk about gods and Time stuff with regular people. But you're a Ranger. Apollo's your boss."

"That's right," she said. "How do you like it in your new home?"

"It stinks. The last place we were, kids got to do a lot of what pleased us. They had 100 channels twenty four hours a day. Here, TV's two stations, three hours a night."

He went out on the porch. Nancy leaned in the doorway. Teddy looked at her. "You seen Apollo much?" he asked.

"When we graduated from the Academy, at the end of the ceremony we heard a sound like a bell. We all turned and stood on a hill. Radiant. He struck his lyre. Then he was gone."

Teddy said nothing. Nancy asked, "You've seen Lord Pluto?"

"Pluto's Mickey Mouse's dog! You mean Godfather Death? I don't remember the first time. I was too little. Later, though, when I was around four, my dad came to see us. My grandma took care of me. My mom died when I was born. Dad was away all the time then. Working.

"This time he took me on a walk. It was winter. Down the street from us was a big park with steep hills. I remember trees were bare and they had these little ponds that had ice on them. There were other people walking, kids playing.

"We went along and he said, 'Look at this.' He showed me a marble. Blue and white and green and brown. 'We call it a World Turner.' He rolled it in his hand.

"'Look up,' he said and when I did, the hills and ponds were there and lots of trees. But no road or people. We were alone. Nothing but crows calling.

"My dad said, 'There's someone I want you to meet.' I grabbed his fingers. He led me up a slope and through the woods. I scuffed the leaves.

"All of a sudden a man was standing right in front of us. He wore tall black boots and a big black overcoat. Everyone shows him as a skull in a hood with a big cutting blade. But that's not so. He's got skin and everything. And he talks softly.

"Godfather Death smiled and said, 'Jack Daw. And Teddy.' He crouched down so he was near my height. 'Last time I met, I asked your father to bring you back when you could talk and understand.' He said other stuff. Then he gave me this neat present. Said he'd see me again."

Teddy reached into a pocket and took out a magnifying glass. "It's called A Glass Darkly. If you looked through it, everything you'd see is stuff being bigger. I look through it with my left eye and it shows me your past. Right eye, shows your future."

He closed his left eye and looked at her through the glass. "You're going to have a baby," he said, surprised. "A girl."

Nancy's jaw tightened. She had only learned she was pregnant the day before. Upstairs, men's footsteps sounded. The door opened.

"Is it that guy, you're with?" Teddy asked. Nancy shook her head. On her first independent assignment, in a war-torn Beirut, she'd spent a night with a handsome stranger, a foreign correspondent. Teddy closed his right eye and looked at her.

"You saw Apollo again," he said, sounding disappointed like she had lied. "That was him you were with."

Nancy was stunned. She hadn't known.

On the way back to the trolley stop, a huge blimp floated overhead bearing the sign, "Our thanks to Americans from Africa. Who endured oppression and practiced generosity!"

They passed a baseball diamond and a kid's pick-up game. A barefoot shortstop made a diving catch.

Teddy walked on the grass beside the pavement. "How come I don't get to wear shoes in summer?"

"Better for your feet, for your back" said his father. "You'll appreciate it when you get older."

"Everything's for your own good," said Teddy. "I hate it here." Ed laughed.

"You tell Miss Kane about how you want to be a Time Ranger?" Jack Daw asked his son.

"I changed my mind," Teddy mumbled. "Lord Apollo's no kind of godfather at all."

Death and the Maidens

It was winter break 1982 on a New England prep school campus with snow on the ground and not too many kids. Ranger Chief Nancy Kane and Ranger Jake Stockley stepped out of the Time Stream and strode toward the administrative building. They had been together for fifteen years and handled local customs smoothly. Jake stayed a discreet half step behind Nancy.

Young women, administrators jogging to a conference with legal pads in hand, gave the visitor and her servant the cold shoulder. Boys in thermal snowsuits carried quivers and bows, stood around the base of a gold statue of Diana the Archer and watched quietly.

Nancy saw the kid they wanted. She gave Jake a pat on the arm. He dipped his head slightly and turned aside while she continued on to her meeting with the Head Mistress. As Jake approached the statue, a good-looking dark kid in his mid-teens stepped away from the others.

"Let's take a walk," the kid said

When the Ranger introduced himself, Teddy Daw said, "I'm TD around here." He made no effort to shake the Ranger's hand. "I know by the way you looked at me, that we already met sometime when I'm older."

Jake gestured in the direction in which Nancy had gone. "My wife told me about the Glass Darkly."

"I don't need it anymore. I got the idea. Left eye, you see people get born. Right eye you see them get dead."

Jake smiled. "She also said you were kind of a scary kid."

They reached a turn in the walk. On the other side of the quad, two young women carrying Kalashnikovs went past the statue. One made a casual gesture and all the boys trotted obediently after them.

"Before I came here, my old man explained that in this world, race isn't such a thing," said TD. "It's all whether or not you're a girl. Not just a girl. A huntress. If you gotta be a boy, you need to be a stud muffin and keep your mouth shut. If you don't, you work in a factory."

"Girl friend?" Jake indicated a ring on a chain around TD's neck.

"Cindy's captain of the archery team. She went home for the break. She calls the shots. I learned to play the game from her."

"But keeping your mouth shut is hard."

"What I know is that Lady Diana's going to gather all the huntresses and muffins, turn them to hamburger in some big

gods versus machines war Upstream. But nobody's going to listen to some boy with ideas."

"Something here your old man must have wanted you to see."

"Whatever it was, he didn't need to see it himself. He put me in school and disappeared."

"You see your godfather a lot?"

TD looked at Jake. "Cops like asking questions. How about you answer some. That Ranger you were just with, Nancy. The way you are together, I can tell you work for her all the time. That's not just a cover."

"You're right about not needing the glass."

"You're happy the way you two are?"

"Mostly."

"A long time ago, when Nancy talked to me, she was pregnant. With Lord Apollo's baby. What happened to that kid?"

"The gods took her away to raise. For their own reasons," Jake said. But he sighed as he did. "Now, how about my question. Seen Godfather Death lately?"

"Oh my, yes. I got to see beneath the skin."

Jake waited. Finally the boy said, "I was thirteen. My old man took me to see the one I still thought of as my godfather. He was still impressive. But benevolent. We stood on this rocky hill, the three of us.

"All of a sudden, I saw something behind my godfather's eyes. He said, 'Let me show you my kingdom,' And the voice was big, echoed in my head. The voice of the god inside him.

This hand took my shoulder. It was huge and we were alone. His eyes were above me like stars. His voice chilled my heart. No scythe or hood. Didn't need them. Took me down into the ground, dirt closing up on my eyes and mouth. But I could still see. And breathe.

"We came to this endless cave. I looked around and it was full of flickering candles. They were all around us and they went on forever. He told me the candles were mortal lives. When one of us dies, the candle goes out.

"He told me how, so he could feel what we feel, maybe show a little mercy now and then, he took a mortal, a godchild, looked out at the world through that mortal's eyes. When that one died, he took another.

"He had three godchildren around my age, he said. One of us would be THE godchild. This was what my father had worked for my whole life."

On that winter afternoon, Jake heard shots and cheers from a distant rifle range. "You could turn them down," he said. "Go your own way!"

"But I don't," TD said. "Which is why there's so much interest in me."

The Ranger looked at the kid. The eyes that looked back were remote but not inhuman. Stockley felt like he was being judged.

Death in the Afternoon

At the Fort Worth Livestock Auction all the attention was on the bidding. On that June day of a very troubled 1964 it was better to concentrate on that than on what was happening in the rest of that world.

So no one noticed the white man in his late thirties. He walked out of nowhere in a seersucker suit, string tie and bow tie. He sat way off at the edge of the crowd, diagonally behind a Negro man, the only one in the audience.

"Surprised to find you here," Ranger Centurion Ed Brown murmured.

"Never miss one of these things," said Death's Godson without turning around. Daw was about the same age as Brown. In his faded shirt and jeans, he looked like a small-time rancher. "My Godfather thinks they're instructive."

The place looked like a small indoor rodeo arena. Ted Daw's eyes didn't leave the action. The auctioneer stood on a platform across the auction pit from the bidders. At either end of the sand floor was a wooden gate.

The gate to the left of Daw and Brown swung open and a great dark cow emerged with a calf tagging right behind. Stockmen with crops at the end of long staves urged them across the floor.

"Another pair, mother and daughter," the auctioneer's chant was rhythmic. "From Korby Ranch. Bidding the mother for a hundred pounds. Three years old. Do I hear thirty?" Someone said thirty. "Let me hear thirty-five?" A fat man to the right gestured with a folded bid sheet. Eyes went in his direction. "I hear thirty five. For forty? For forty? For forty? Sold for thirty-five. To Hormel," the auctioneer said. And the fat man made a check mark on a piece of paper.

"The agent from Hormel Meats is the king here," said Daw. "Buys everything. Better at the death business than me." His voice was low. No one who wasn't right on top of them could have known the two men were talking.

The gate at the right of the auction floor opened. The cow was driven through. The calf tried to follow and was stopped. The gate closed. The calf bellowed after its mother who could be heard answering from further and further away.

"Do I hear fifteen?" went the chant, "Heifer from the Korby Ranch. Fine to raise and fatten. Do I hear twenty? Do I hear twenty-five?" The calf was sold to a rancher. It bolted out still bawling for its mother.

"Off she goes through The Gate of Sighs," said Daw "Families broken up, living beings bought and sold. By professionals just doing their jobs."

"You're aware of what's going to happen here," Ed Brown said.

"Yes I'm aware that the gods have decided to turn this world into a kind of firebreak. Lord Dionysius and his favorite lady are about to make merry. The Time Rangers are here to direct traffic. Make sure not everybody dies in the process."

"Not an assignment I chose," Brown replied.

"That world where you saw me when I was a kid? Dumb but well meaning. That was Apollo trying to do everything. Somewhat different tactics here."

"Real politics. Tough choices. This place is going to go very bad. In ways that would make it harder for humanity to survive. It needs to be dammed off from the Time Stream."

"You're under direct orders from Lord Apollo?"

"From Headquarters. I've never seen Him."

"Not even at graduation?"

"Nope. I was taken out of the Academy on special assignment when I was seventeen. Got commissioned when it was over."

"And had an edge over your classmates." Ted Daw glanced at Brown with curiosity. "Which is why you're in charge of operations here."

As Daw spoke, the auctioneer broke the rhythm of his chant and said, "These next lots are the Commissioner's cattle."

He indicated a poker faced man in a white Stetson who stood at the back. The face, the eyes, were familiar to Ed and the cattlemen present. But not to most people in this particular 1964.

"LBJ's not had so high a reach here as in other places I've seen," said Daw. "Lyndon Johnson, Texas Cattle Commissioner. He's the one you're here to see." Daw had a marble in his hand. It was blue and white and brown and green. "Interesting seeing you, Centurion Brown," he said.

The gate on the left burst open. A cow and calf ran in, stared around at all the people. "Do I hear thirty? Do I hear thirty-five? Do I hear forty?" went the cry.

"Sold, Hormel." The gate on the right opened. The stockmen drove the commissioner's cow through it and the gate slammed shut.

But this terrified calf, instead of trying to run after her mother, turned to where Daw rolled the marble in his fingers. She bawled as if, by instinct, she recognized Death's Godson and was making an appeal. But as she did, he was gone.

"She sure likes you, son!" someone shouted. Everybody laughed. They were looking at Ed. Even Johnson gave him an appraising glance. No one remembered the black man who had been there.

"Twenty-five," said the auctioneer. "Do I hear twenty-five?"

Then, as Ed Brown knew would happen, a buzz began at the back of the crowd. A man came in and whispered in the commissioner's ear. Johnson rose and headed for the exit. They paid no attention to Centurion Brown who walked twenty feet behind.

Accompanied by an aide, the Cattle Commissioner went down a hall. Passing an open office door, Ed Brown caught television images. The U.S. capital dome was in flames, Lady Wexford, blood stained, held a man's head by its hair.

Johnson's car was parked behind the auction shed in the welter of cattle pens and railroad sidings. The Commissioner thought he was going to get to Love Field and fly back to Austin. But as he reached the car, figures appeared.

Centurion Brown watched Nancy Kane with Jake Stockley and a squad of Time Rangers as they intercepted Johnson. A brief flurry, a stifled exclamation, then spiral rings were twisted. and the Cattle Commissioner was gone from that time and place.

Brown nodded, satisfied. It was an intricate business making the future safe for humanity and the gods.

Death Shall Have No Dominion

Some years passed on that world before Ted Daw rolled out of Time and onto a Texas Hill Country road. He wore a pilgrim's khaki hiking clothes and carried a stout stick. A rabbit, startled, raced through tall grass. The animal looked not so much as if it was in a hurry as if it was in a hurry enough.

Perhaps something had been wrong with this world. Nations had joined almost enthusiastically in the destruction the Bacchae had begun. The destruction was immense, but not total. Humanity survived, Apollo made sure of that. The Time Stream flowed on and this world was a small eddy.

Windmills turned slowly above the town of Commissioner a short distance away. Daw knew that if he went there he would find in every house a picture of Johnson, the man who had emerged from chaos to establish this peaceful stronghold.

But Death's Godson had already spotted the grove of oak up ahead, the still pool, the priest's two-story shotgun-style cottage with a generator out back. As he headed up the road, he saw the old man sunning himself on a bench and smiling.

The temple priest rose when he saw Ted, leaned on his knees to do it. "Mr. Daw," said Jake Stockley. "This is an honor. Maybe one honor too many?"

"Relax," said Ted Daw shaking hands. "The retail end of my Godfather's business takes care of itself. Promotions and one-time-only-offers are my specialty. Interested?"

"What's left of my current life will be more than enough. Thanks. I assume you're here to talk to Nancy."

"How did it happen?" Daw asked as Shockley led him past the still pool and into the grove.

"Something went out of her when Lord Apollo took their kid away. Out of me too, I guess, since I'd come to think of her as mine. Nancy went on after that. But with what she saw when this place got razed, she no longer wanted to. She called to Apollo. This is what happened."

Jake stood aside and Death's Godson stepped into the grove. In the center of the trees was a flat, polished stone. On the stone was a video screen.

Daw approached the altar of Apollo. As he did, a hologram image of a young man appeared against the trees. A temple was in each eye. A lyre, held like a guitar, covered his nakedness. The crown he wore could have been laurel or thorns.

Before Daw could focus, Apollo was gone. On the video screen, a woman seemed to float in a clear liquid. She wore a white robe. Her eyes were closed. Her voice, warm but remote as if she spoke in her sleep, asked, "What question do you have for the Lord of Life?"

"Nancy Kane," he said. "It's Ted Daw. And I have a question for you."

After a slight pause, the voice said, "Tell me your question."

"My Godfather asks if you are happy like this. He asks if you wish to live fully again."

When the voice replied, it was slow, reflective. "They come here, pilgrims. Some think it's to see Jesus. Or Elvis. They ask, 'Will my lover be faithful?' 'Will my children prosper?'"

"I answer as well as I can. Sometimes, one asks what brought me here. And I tell how Lord Apollo gave me a child and he took the child. How I despaired of life and called out to him to take away my pain. How he found a way to do that and allow me to serve the gods and humanity."

"Jake is still here and that pleases me very much. Tell your Godfather that I am content with this as long as it lasts and I wish for no more after that."

Back at the shotgun cottage, Jake told Daw. "He turned her into an interactive video. For old times' sake. Better than ending up as a bush, maybe."

Then he looked at Death's godson. "Tell me. The way it got arranged that we all met you. Nancy and Ed and me. We were on some kind of finalists list for a new life, weren't we?"

"Yes. That time you and Nancy visited me at school was when I realized I was seeing the Rangers for a reason. And being able to figure out things like that is one reason I became Godson."

"Nancy was my Godfather's choice. He knew, of course, knew before the contest was even proposed, that she would accept. But the gods all love her anyway."

"You were my choice. And I guessed that honor and duty meant you wouldn't accept. But I extend the offer one last time."

Jake shook his head. Daw shrugged and smiled. "It doesn't do to question the ways of mortals."

Oh Death, Where Is Thy Sting-A-Ling?

When the great cities of that world burned in that terrible June of 1964, few died of the flames. Glass and metal frag tore the life out of them. People strangled on blasts of smoke. Lady Wexford choked to death that way in the Paris fire. Bacchus, Lord Dionysius tore his hair and howled when he found out.

Ed Brown, supervising a partial evacuation of Chicago, was smashed into the pavement by a young woman hurtling from fifty stories above. His fingers were on his spiral ring.

The Ranger centurion had been in the midst of the stride that would have carried him into Time. Fire devoured his c and the young woman's and so many others.

First Brown was in a vast cave full of pinpoints of light. They flickered like candles, vast fields of them, extending be the horizon. Lights went out constantly and new lights replaced them.

Then he was in a closed space, a room. A familiar voice said, "Hello Ed Brown." Ted Daw looked as he had when Brown first saw him.

"Centurion Brown, at the request of Lord Apollo, my Godfather offers you the gift of a new life. Do you accept?"

As Daw spoke Ed Brown was aware of Death's eyes staring out through his Godson's.

Brown worked his throat, his mouth, for a moment before he could speak. "Lord Apollo asked for my life?"

"He asked for a life like yours," Daw replied. Brown kept looking at him and Daw said, "Just after I became THE Godson, I met him on a country road in Arcadia. Apollo, Lord of Reason, stood tall and light played behind him. It took breath away. He didn't speak to me, but to my Godfather.

"Apollo chatted up his uncle about family for a while. Made Death chuckle and then reminded him of a certain favor had asked. The Lord of Life needed an agent who had tasted death. It was necessary that this one be from a certain time place. He had suggested three candidates. He wondered if we had made a decision.

My Godfather knows that the possibility of a reprieve, however slight, makes mortality a little more bearable for everyone. Besides, he wanted to help his brother's boy. He said that I would ask you."

"We all knew we were being interviewed for something. Nancy and Jake were the first and second choices and the turned you down."

"But you accept?"

"You bet."

Ted Daw stepped aside. The Time Ranger saw Pluto in his chariot, Persephone and her pomegranate and realized I was inside the Gate of Sighs.

The hammer rang on the anvil.

Ed Brown was dressed in the uniform of a Centurion of Rangers. A spiral ring was placed on his finger.

The hammer rang again.

A mirror was held in front of him briefly. He looked as he had on the day he met Daw at the cattle auction. He took deep breath.

The hammer rang a third time.

"Welcome once more to life," said Death's godson. Pluto and Persephone parted as the Bronze Doors swung open. Brown looked out on the light and the crowd staring up at him. He saw Sophia Cortubas standing on the stairs. She was wearing the gold shoulder straps of a tribune of Rangers.

He let out a long breath, almost a sob. Then he walked towards the stairs with an even tread.

"The servants of Life are brave," he heard Ted Daw murmur behind him.

The End