

Channeling the Demon

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* Channeling the Demon is an offbeat, stylistic supernatural horror novel. It is fast-paced, with vivid supernatural and horror scenes featuring monsters, demons, and evil priests. A spirit channeler who heads an evil worldwide occult church channels a powerful and ancient demon from a spirit realm and calls forth a series of supernatural events that will lead to world destruction if not stopped.

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Opening Vignette: SUNRISE

The sun arrived with brilliance, and a light breeze swept the streets. Randal Rama strolled around the corner of Spencer Avenue to find the old neighborhood as fresh as it had been in the days of his youth. Scales of dust lifted from his eyes, and his past drifted as a clear vision in his mind. The focus of it was a place up the road - Ace's Otherworld Books, which was the only

university Randal had attended. He guessed that most of what he knew he'd learned in the reading room there.

Strolling up the avenue, Randal smiled broadly. Today, happiness was in not being recognized - the people on the sidewalk didn't seem to know him. Half a block from the bookstore, he stopped. People were streaming out the door. Paul Hay was in the lead, a miracle healer, his crystal pendulum glittering in the sun. Randal also knew the others; they were regulars in the new spiritual scene, and without a doubt, they would all recognize him.

As the people began to shuffle about, looking up and down the street, Randal ducked out of sight in an alleyway. Standing in shadows and litter, he felt odd but not angry. He wanted this to be a quiet stroll; he wanted to be alone, not crowded by admirers. A problem came with fame. You could never be out and alone.

A limo passed, and a few moments later, Randal stepped back out to the sidewalk, guessing that the limo was ferrying a famous person to the bookstore for some sort of trance or channeling session.

A man emerged from the car, and the eager crowd surrounded him. Squinting in the sunlight, Randal saw that the man was the prophet, Matthew. The prophet was a channeler. Matthew claimed to be the reincarnation of the Biblical apostle. He looked like he might be the genuine article - wearing robes and sandals, dark hair down to the middle of his back, and a heavy beard. Matthew had a masculine face, an aquiline nose, and a deep voice. Watching them file in, Randal figured it was easier to believe in Matthew than to disbelieve. There was magic in his eyes; their glitter would sugar your world with delusion, and Randal knew it was delusion. Matthew was deluded himself, but he wasn't a liar. He really did think he was the prophet, and Randal understood that quite well. It was that way with many New Earth people. They believed in impossible things, weird things, maybe even crazy things, and they believed because faith in the strange made them happy.

The crowd filed back into the bookstore, and the bell tinkled as the door closed. Randal strolled by in a daydream, and he didn't bother to glance inside. His morning walk hadn't been spoiled yet, so he decided to head over to what remained of the old park.

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The picture window at the back of the bookstore framed a world of golden sunlight. Matthew stepped into its radiance with the assurance of a sun king. Some people were sitting on the floor; a few others were in spoon-backed chairs. They remained silent as Matthew began to speak.

The prophet's tone was ominous and deep. "As you all know, there has been a wave of apocalyptic visions. Many of our people have been stricken by attacks of illness, terror, and madness, though I haven't been affected in an adverse manner myself. In my pockets and elsewhere on my person, I have charms and other items taken from the stricken seers. Using these as a focus, I intend to channel this new spirit and gain control of it. I will begin in the usual manner."

Some people nodded knowingly, others fidgeted and whispered. Notes tinkled from the piano, and Matthew fastened a purple blindfold over his eyes.

He held up some of the charms and seconds later began to speak softly. "I have fallen from a window and see an ancient time - huge ferns, palms, naked savages, idols, monsters, and demons. The odors of blood and ashes are thick. Now I see another window. One that leads to the future. I see the planet in flames, and people made hideous by plagues. Fanged demonic creatures are swarming up from blackened pits in the earth."

Matthew fell to one knee, suddenly stricken. His hand flew to his throat. "The sounds I hear are cries from the windows of the past and future. I feel I must convey this message. I can see the demon king. I am not the chosen one. Randal Rama is to be the prophet and chosen messenger. He will live, and I will die!"

His words garbled, Matthew continued to speak. A few tense moments passed, then he covered his face with his hands, choked, and released a muffled cry - a sound like hidden death. His followers shook and gasped. He tore away his blindfold, revealing eyes like knives of intense fire. His mouth opened, and a steaming tongue emerged. Ghastly hissing and surreal magma flew from his throat.

Gasps filled the room as boils appeared on scalded skin. Reality became undone as the supernatural found a hold on human flesh. Chairs tumbled as the people panicked and fled. Matthew released a last hiss of steam and smoke as he collapsed. Sickly odors of decay filled the air.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SPIRIT

BULLETIN: KARMA CHANNEL NEWS is happy to report that New Earth guru Randal Rama is back in town. The controversial spirit channeler will be at his local temple on Avenue Road, holding spiritual ceremonies with his Children of the Seven Ethers. Tomorrow....

Randal Rama felt the radiance of the sun. It glowed with warmth in his bones as he strolled through Spencer Park. Both his personal clouds and the clouds above were vessels of clarity and shining white. Despite his enormous success, he looked and felt like an average middle-aged guy, though he wasn't quite so thick in the middle or ruddy in the face. Today, the channeler had his thick dark hair brushed back in a conventional style instead of standing up with jell, and his look was casual; he sported a comfortable blue summer shirt, long shorts, and a conservative pair of sandals.

A gleaming silver cart caught Randal's eye, ragged leaves rustling in summer trees brought him an uplifting sense of homey earth, and the breeze added to his inner harmony. Ah, it's a divine omen, he thought, looking at the blanket of sunshine and a curvy blond gal opening a silver hot-dog cart. Randal was being dramatic. He didn't really believe in omens. He saw no connection between small natural occurrences and the course of human events.

The sunny vision was also framed by his good mood. The delicious picture of the young woman holding a bare arm and a hot dog out to him was symbolic and enticing, symbolic of the life he really believed in and had come in secret to enjoy. Randal believed in voluptuous women and their lusty love, and he

believed in mustard-covered hot-dogs - to be eaten while one contemplated Epicurus and the good life. Unfortunately, he preached on the purity of celibacy, health food, and deep meditation; he preached this to people who couldn't understand that feeling good is a natural state in a balanced life, not something forced through personality-warping programs set by others. True spirituality was effortless; it was already inside a person, and he supposed that religion was a business where you sold people what they already had somewhere in their backyard.

Mustard streaked his chin, the well-planned chin he'd always been comfortable with, and in his thoughts, he drifted to the past, poorer neighborhoods, and the ambitious little boy he'd been. Randal had been an awkward child, the sort of weird kid adults overlook, and when you have to kick someone to be noticed, you dream of gaining recognition. Like a tree reaches for the sun, he'd sought to solve the problem of his boyish insecurity by gaining recognition, and all to no avail. No one close to him had been bright enough to note his talents, so he withdrew to fantasy battles, adventures with comic-book superheroes, and then he became interested in the occult and strange powers. Saturday afternoons were spent on science fiction worlds and in realms of the tarot and magic. The back room of Ace's Otherworld Books had been Randal's time machine to every possible world.

As he leaned against a bench, he flipped his hot-dog wrapper into a green waste bin, then he sat and smiled at the picturesque afternoon. The grassy field rolled away from his bench and gained a luxurious dimension of shade trees before ending at an expressway. The expressway and its curtain of smog partitioned the park area from a dingy factory zone, and in a dusty, gray part of his mind, Randal recalled factory life. He remembered how being a two-dimensional cog in the mechanical processes of industrial society had satisfied no more than his need for daily bread and activity. He'd felt as unique and useful as one of the throwaway things they mass-produced. Even though he had been immediately promoted, the brand of recognition he received failed to satisfy him - the prestige was superficial because he hadn't earned it. He'd pleased his superiors by parroting them and sharing their limited outlook. They paid people for not thinking, and the sort of thinking Randal did now was magic well beyond them. "Factories and machines, they're always producing stifled, empty people," Randal thought. "Empty people who need me to fill them."

Deep in the field, some breeze-tossed willows were casting a play of shadows on the grass. As Randal's thoughts continued their own play, his hazel eyes fixed on a patch of shadow separating from the trees. No longer inclined to mingle, the shadow stood alone under a clear sky. "Religion," Randal thought absently. "All religious leaders have been unfaithful to human nature. There is no religion that boldly reconciles the sensuous and the ideal in a truthful, open way of life. There are only rainbows leading over human nature into abstract realms of hypocrisy. It's all meaningless outreach and expression for its own sake."

The shadow scooted over the field, then it swept over his face, and he was swallowed by darkness. He wasn't afraid. He merely looked up. "I pray this darkness is mercy," he said, imagining he was suffering from a momentary heat spell, "because no man can deliver his people to heaven and happiness." The darkness seeped through his pores like the cold grave seeps through a

corpse, yet it was mercy - the mercy of delusion. His theological confusion was swept away, and he became a fountain of words. Fantastic words, potent words - words that gave him the answers others would want to believe. For the first time in his life, he was channeling a spirit; for the first time, he was legitimately possessed.

The main Rama Temple in Toronto was cathedral-sized and had once been an Anglican church. Its new stained glass was decorated with the images of many Eastern deities, cherubs, and mystic symbols. If Randal Rama was a false prophet, he wasn't one who worshiped any specific idol. He was more of a pantheist and worshiped all things, especially occult things, as manifestations of God. Now, as a true believer, he stood in the wings in the rich, blissful light of evening. Words filled his breath like fish fill the ocean. A crowd of his Children sat on padded blankets on the polished stone floor, hoping a spirit would touch them, and they were so hungry for the occult that almost any spirit would do.

A bald female attendant, wearing loose liquid silk, gave Randal his cue. Gold collection vases had been placed throughout the temple; it was time for Randal's voice to fill them. There was momentary silence, then the whispers of admirers as Randal approached the pulpit. His dark brown hair was jelled and standing in waves, his full face was powder-pale, and he walked like a man in the clouds, his white, purple, and gold robe touching the polished marble floor and trailing behind him in a small train.

At the pulpit, Randal raised his arms and shook from head to robe to toe as he conducted the spirits like a lightning rod. He opened in a voice that quavered. It rose from deep tones to a sort of tenor that touched the ear with force. He was the best of the spiritualist orators, very professional and not vulgar. As the streaming light of evening sugared stained glass, he addressed some church business and then delivered a prophetic message.

"... To all present and to come. Greetings. This is the truth and the prophecy. I am a spirit of Rama. The human race languished under skies of gloom and despair, locked in the bleak bonds of slavery that were the ages preceding my first incarnation. Men were brutes drunk with cruelty, so I gave them wisdom. The great Rama, God and the gods, sent me to Earth to enlighten. I have done it, and one day I will gather my perfect ones for the eon of paradise.

The knowing brow of Rama is furrowed in sleep today. In holistic fulfillment, Rama dreams. Our reality is but a portion of the dream, and like a dream, it will one day perish. Children, you are all an expression of Rama. Earthly incarnation is Rama's way of enjoying the interwoven spirit of the many. A body alone is dead and impure - an empty shell. Rama must vitalize the heart. The purposing spirit must enter and, through unity, transcend matter and form to become a perfect essence.

You are the godlike dreams of excellent minds in this fabulous vista, and you know that I am more. I am the dream you dream of, and I am your wish. I am of the divine ether, a prince of eternal oases. A lord of wisdom, I am transcendental love's holy vessel pouring forth. I am the trumpets at the end of the dream, and I will raise the wings of angels and command the brass feet of the gods to smash the universe to dust.

In concert with Rama, I am all within and all without. In harmony, I am the electric dream eye viewing all of the days. I am conterminous with the past; it is a wave of my hand, and I hold the future like space holds the world. The present is the passing of my being, the fountain of my awareness. Destiny is a direction I purpose.

Know today that the end of the dream is prophesied, and that the requiem of my glory is echoing across the world from my sacred spirit realm. Very soon, a Messiah will come, an almighty hand will carry you away to beauty and peace for all of time. Far away from this world, on a bold new horizon, you will be made perfect, whole, and real!"

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The sun shone like a jewel in the summer haze, and it stood in tune with the prophecy, growing shades older in anticipation of the spirit Messiah. Delicate notes of chimes were in the air, and they were the sounds of Randal Rama's heavily ornamented robe. Brilliant crystals and metals gave him the appearance of a sunburst as he strolled through the tall grass toward a circular area of patterned interlocking stones. A pantheon of idols cast shadows on the stones. Four bronze-tanned Amazons, wearing loose short robes, sandals, and breastplates, followed at Randal's heels. They were his bodyguards and celibate priestesses. In the background, a mint-new monastery sparkled under a cloudless sky.

The flank of a reposing lion idol made a perfect bench for Randal. Leafy boughs cooled him as he checked the position of the sun. He lowered his gaze and saw a compact blue car drive under an arch by the monastery and park in the mosaic lot. A tall, handsome man breezed out of the car and went to the trunk. With a brown leather case in hand, he walked across the field. He was naturally muscular, clean-shaven, and wearing a loose white linen shirt decorated with a gold sickle moon. Sandals and safari shorts completed his outfit.

Randal knew the man well. He wasn't a member of the church. He was an old friend named Dan Athusta. Dan passed through the idols and sat on a rough boulder. He appeared to be austere comfortable and was more like another religious person than a journalist. Dan opened his briefcase and scanned some neatly clipped pamphlets and newspaper articles. His eyes were deep and dark. When he looked up at the priestesses, his expression wasn't wan with celibacy. Taking out a compact recorder, he began adjusting the settings in preparation for what would be a historic interview with Randal.

Randal's hazel eyes lacked their usual sparkle, and his round cheeks were drained of color. He didn't seem at all powerful today. The shadows from the boughs swaying above him seemed vital protection, keeping him from melting.

"You may begin with your questions," Randal said. "As your humble servant, I will try to reply."

"Okay," Dan said. "Your prophecy of an arriving Messiah has an Eastern flavor. Are we to expect him or her to rise in the Zen wing of the Seven Ethers?"

"Possibly," Randal said. Serious reflection darkened his brow. "I'm waiting for a further prophecy, and I'm still the spirit's vehicle in this matter. Being divinely

touched, I'm aware of the prophecy's presence within me, but I can't yet give it intelligent expression."

"This is a miraculous time. The feared ecumenical priesthood has already fallen into step with you. Many high orders are looking to the Children." Dan paused and looked to the sun religiously. "Do you suppose the spirit of the Messiah is at work now, seeding the lands for his coming?"

"Yes," Randal said. He raised a symbol-rich sleeve to the sky. "The spirit is already here, and at this moment, the dead are being resurrected. In the coming days of the Messiah, legends will rise throughout the world."

Blowing shadows highlighted the masculine symmetry of Dan's face as he looked over some clippings. "Your brand of mysticism is at odds with modern science. Do you still believe the universe rises from the mind?"

"The universe is composed of subatomic particles, so small that they have no location in space. They are more like tiny properties than objects - qualities that chain together in complex ways to build the higher planes of life. Indeed, they are energy, information, and thought created in the unseen brain of Rama - thought rising from the mind of God. With science, we have cast a net, and we see the shape and beauty of God."

Dan appeared to be satisfied. "Some old friends of yours have released a new book, and in it they say you channel nothing but lies. Can you defend your abilities?"

Randal cleared his throat; his gaze was steady and confident. "My channeling is a special use of mental gifts and spiritual vision. The disbelief of the ignorant and earthbound is to be expected. The book you mention offers nothing new or beneficial. It's just skepticism and a defense of Western materialism."

Randal was handling the interview well. Dan paused to dash some notes, then, as he studied the paragraph, sudden darkness interfered, and he looked up. A startling transformation was taking place - Randal was melting into a swirl of dark mist. The priestesses jumped up and stepped back, but they were obviously not surprised. In an instant, Randal transformed completely, becoming a small, dark star, floating and pulsing above the stone lion. Amazed, Dan ducked back a ways, keeping low as he moved between the idols. Surprise, combined with fear, made the miracle complete in his mind. He couldn't take his eyes off the star and watched as it imploded, pouring in on itself.

Randal reappeared, his ornamented robe flowing and ringing with otherworldly chimes. Waves of energy and shadows raced over him. He was rising in a tilted tunnel, an illusion of flight, though the motion didn't take him anywhere. His face was radiant, and his expression pained and ecstatic, as if he'd seen too much of another world. He began to prophesy, and the voice wasn't his own. "I am a spirit of Rama, and for Rama I command and declare. There will be an offering. When the moon is full, this human vehicle, Randal Rama, will perish. His life is forfeit and a gift in recognition of the coming time of glory. His honor is to perish naturally by exposure to the elements, and his death will be a powerful sign. It will mark the moments before the miraculous descent of the Messiah's spirit. Blessed is the human vehicle the Messiah chooses to enter."

KARMA CHANNEL UPDATE: Spiritualist author Dan Athusta will be appearing on the "Private Idol podcast" after this evening's news. At issue is his recording of Randal Rama's miraculous powers and prophecies. Prophecies of death and a spiritualist Messiah

CHAPTER TWO: PRIEST HOODS

In the early morning, a loud crash woke Randal. One of his priestesses was trying to hold the door shut with a heavy Isis idol she'd wedged against it. The door splintered, and the sound of a battering ram boomed in his head. He popped out of bed and threw on a robe as the door came off its hinges. The priestess fell, and the idol shattered at his feet, then three fierce men burst in and seized him. Before he could say a word, one of them swung a sword, killing the fallen priestess. Randal stared in horror at the blood and body. Then he began to curse as he was rushed down a blood-spotted hallway.

A metallic-blue limousine spun up dust as it raced down a country road. They passed abandoned houses and left the sun trailing like a hot-air balloon as they followed the winding road farther into a summer-lush temperate forest. Inside, in the plush back seat, Randal trembled. Now that his priestesses had been overpowered, he was in the hands of the church's dreaded ecumenical priesthood. He didn't know what to fear more - the evil spirit possessing him or his own priests. They were the sort of priests that didn't need to be possessed by devils because they were devils. The ecumenical priesthood had been restless and had an interpretation of his prophecy of his own death. Randal knew these renegades would have something unthinkable in store for him.

A heavyset priest with a black beard sat beside Randal; the priest's blue silk jacket, wide belt, and large nose ring softened his coarse looks. For practical reasons, the driver was wearing faded jeans and a blue T-shirt. He had straight shoulder-length dark hair and the temperamental personality of an ex-con. The third man was a black African with a bone-chilling smile. Randal wasn't sure what they placed faith in other than jewels and their own divinity. Ostensibly, they were obeying the prophecy by seeing to it that he died of exposure, or their version of it, which could include sheer murder as a feature element.

Randal sighed deeply. His ghost of fight was already leaving him. His control had been tenuous for too long, and now that he'd been kidnapped, he felt grim relief in the face of death. He spoke to the priest beside him. "This Messiah thing has become a dangerous and vain fantasy, Averam. You should know better. It's common for religious people to try to identify with their ideals and then go awry and become power-mad. If you think it over, you'll see that we really don't need a Messiah."

Averam turned predatory eyes on Randal. The fragments of sunshine dancing through the tinted windows glowed almost supernaturally in his beard. "So, the world's vainest man is now an expert on vanity and ideals. This isn't a decision we have a choice in - it's a revelation. We know the spirit has worked through you, and we are obeying the spirit. There is no reason for you to be afraid. You will die peacefully of lack of food and water while we meditate and prepare for

the descent of the spirit. Because of our faith and obedience, we assume the spirit will choose one of us as its holy vessel."

"Obedience and faith are what you lack, Randal," said the driver. "You have bad karma. Gold and the flesh have blinded you to spiritual truth."

Faint defiance showed on Randal's face. "That may be so, Nihil. But you can testify to my last words, and they are: To hell with karma and Messiahs, I'll take any temple in the sun over the damp world of the dead."

The limo homed in on its destination; it turned and bounced slowly down a bumpy dirt road. Randal's heart thumped, and he perspired like he was toiling in the sun rather than resting in air-conditioned luxury. He could feel the presence of the spirit; it was a red-hot crescent, a spiritual desert and place of evil at the back of his mind. He leaned against the door and watched a sea of weed-tops seesaw past the window. The limo came to a halt, and he knew he had to escape before he grew too weak.

Nihil ordered Randal to remain in the back while he removed some packs and goods from storage, then he popped the door open, flashed a Glock pistol as a blunt warning, and holstered it in a belt clip as Randal stumbled out. The car was in the shade cast by a stand of unusually large birch trees and on the edge of the clearing. The clearing was a reservoir of tall weeds. Yellow clover and white parsley provided a pattern of color, and the sun was cooking up a sweet aroma of the wild from the field that contrasted vividly with Randal's thoughts of death and decay.

Doors thumped shut, and the other two priests strolled around the car. They changed into sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts, but didn't look more down-to-earth for it. Averam held a folded robe under his hairy right arm. Randal recognized it as a ceremonial penitent's robe. His stomach muscles tensed, and his look grew bitter.

"To die is terrible enough," Randal said, his voice quaking, not from prophetic power, but from fear. "You should know better than to torture a high priest."

Averam spoke soberly to the African priest. "Well, Turkazim, what do you think? Should we hack off his feet or put out his eyes?"

Turkazim grinned; his face a ghastly orb. Randal trembled and remained silent.

"Cut the head games," Nihil said, his thick brows forming a single line. "You won't die in an unholy manner. There's a stream behind these birches. You'll wash up, put on the penitent's robe, and have a final spiritual meal of water and almonds, and then you'll begin your final meditations. We will also be meditating and performing rites of special atonement. Before the time of the full moon you should be fully cleansed, a holy memory, and one of us will assume the role of Messiah."

"It will make for greater purity if I meditate by the stream," Randal said calmly.

"Where you'll steal sips of water and defile yourself," Nihil said. "No, you'll begin your meditations over there in the cave." He pointed across the field to a cave set in the rocks and brambles on the steep hillside. "The cave is very deep. Once inside, you'll meditate for three days. Any evil or uncleanness, especially sexual uncleanness, that's in you, will be absorbed into the bowels of the earth. On the fourth day, wholly purified, you'll be brought out to pray in the clearing. Your atonement will be made as the elements slowly consume

you. You will be bound, of course. Our personal rites will be performed by the stream."

Events flowed smoothly for Nigil, Turkazim and Averam. Randal's third day in the cave grew near; a red-hot demon rose through faults in the earth and entered his mind. It twisted through his brain like razor ribbon. Panicky sensations ran over him in waves. Cold sweat bathed gooseflesh, and he was sure he was lying at the bottom of a large grave. A gaping mask hung facedown in the darkness above. It looked like something a witch doctor had made, and its jaws were hungry, ready to devour him whole. The sound of dripping water was driving him mad, and with each distant drop, a fire burning at the edge of the mask flared, and it lowered itself a little closer. He tried to command his body to move toward the sound of the water, but he felt no response, only growing numbness and a parched strip of flesh he knew was his open mouth. The hideous mask dropped closer and closer, and its painted lips quivered with cannibalistic hunger. A fire was burning around its edges - through blackened fangs in the mask, he could see the ashen bowels and tormented beings of a dim, distorted hell.

A repulsive swarm of suffering things rose out of a bed of thick green slime and began to crawl to him to claim him for the unholy, and he felt stark terror almost indistinguishable from pain as the bed of slime lifted and rolled like a monster tongue to speed them upon him. Gnarled hands and claws reached out and ripped into his flesh, the slime sucked on his feet perversely. They were about to drag him away when a drop of water smacked his parched throat. More drops followed, and with each one the creatures and the slime faded, then the mask lifted slowly. Its fire cooled and died, but its eyes remained blood-red and glistening.

The cave floor was cool and hard like an altar. Randal's vision slowly came into focus, and he saw a stalactite hanging out of the gloomy darkness. Blotches of color moved at random and patterned to transparent shapes as the water continued to fall into his open mouth. He'd dragged himself deep in the cave looking for water and had met up with the evil spirit. His robe was soggy; he figured he must've inched his way around while numb and delirious. Words of prophecy no longer filled him, but he was in the grip of the spirit. It was wrapped around him like sticky mummy's cerements, and it was crushing the life out of him like a murderous tourniquet. Too weak to move and the very marrow of his bones aching, he closed his eyes. He fell numb, and a broad vision opened before him, spilling in on a river of sunlight.

In the vision, Randal saw Nigil sitting cross-legged on an Indian blanket. He was by the mouth of the cave and in the shade of some scrub. His hair spilled out of a purple cowl, and he was staring solemnly at the alabaster statuette of a demigod. A silver bowl of water and another object, an impure one - his Glock pistol, gleamed. Coming out of his quietude with a start, Nigil looked above. He'd heard something and was suspicious.

Two people appeared. They were high above the cave, at the top of the hill. A man and a woman; they were striking, beautiful as angels, and wore wine robes and sandals that were made of leather that twined to the shins. Randal smiled with hope in his mind, even though his lips remained stern. He knew it was Melanie, his first priestess, and Dan Athusta dressed as a priest.

Dan called down a bold command. "Your actions have profaned the priesthood. Release Randal and surrender!"

"You're not one of the Children, Dan!" Nigil yelled fiercely. He seized his pistol and rose. "You have profaned a sacred purification rite, and for this you will die!"

Unable to control his nerves, Nigil fired two wild shots. Melanie and Dan ducked back over the hill as the bullets ricocheted. Falling to one knee, Nigil took careful aim and waited for them to reappear. While he waited, the hill developed a fateful magnetism, and a slab of limestone began to slide silently in the bushes above the cave. Dan's head and shoulders reappeared, and Nigil zinged a razor-close shot by him. Frustrated, Nigil shoved his gun in his belt and turned to face the clearing. Averam and Turkazim were charging from the birches. Something halted them, and they stared up at the cave, gesturing wildly with their arms. Nigil spun around, but it was too late; rocks poured down on him, and a dust cloud obscured the cave entrance.

Simultaneously, the sun rode out of a cloud, and Dan and Melanie showed again on the boulder-covered hilltop. A brilliant fan of sunbeams touched them. In Averam's dark mind, they were spectacular birds with halos of ill omen; he believed them to be Children who were challenging the spirit because of a mistaken loyalty to Randal. He drew a sacrificial dagger from his robe, and Turkazim followed his lead. Together, with their knives chest-high and gleaming, they paced through the tall weeds. Seeing no firearms, Dan headed down the treacherous hillside. He had the gait of an experienced mountaineer. Melanie followed, but her steps were careful and slow.

In the cave, Randal was well enough to shiver - if he'd been having a vision of murderous priests of ancient days and idols, it wouldn't have been any different. The murderous intent on Turkazim's face and Averam's wicked stare seemed aimed at him directly. Now that the evil spirit of Rama had temporarily lifted its painful curse, he was alone with the vision, and thinking that the spirit must have entered another person. Perhaps it had gone into Averam, and he was the Messiah.

Dan reached the heap of fallen rocks at the cave mouth first. He quickly circled the slide. One of Nigil's hands protruded from the rubble, but his gun wasn't in sight. Averam and Turkazim were now sprinting through the thistles on the short stretch of hillside leading up to the cave, pressed on by fears of Dan retrieving the gun.

Unexpectedly, Dan spun around and leaped from a lip of turf on the hillside. His robe fluttered as he dropped feet first and struck Turkazim on the neck and right shoulder with a bone-crunching blow. Turkazim tumbled on the hillside like a man bowled over by a mountain lion. The rocks and thistles mauled him, and he stabbed himself in the leg before losing consciousness. Dan's fall was partially broken by the impact; he landed in a patch of thistles.

Before Dan had time to rise, Averam fell on him for the kill, slashing viciously for the neck and heart with his knife. With a quick and desperate effort, Dan blocked the strokes. He felt the blade cut through his robe into his forearm. Using his right arm, he punched Averam hard in his bulbous throat as the blade shaved close to his own throat.

Averam choked, rolled off, and jumped up. Spittle dripped from his beard; his eyes were blood-mad and bloodshot like those of a starving cannibal. Dan crouched in the thistles, waiting for him to lunge, but before he could attack again, a jagged stone thrown by Melanie struck his temple, and he went down.

Averam was out cold, so Dan stepped from the thistles and sat in some tall golden grass. Melanie descended to him, prepared to help him treat his wound.

BULLETIN: KARMA CHANNEL NEWS has learned that a shaken Randal Rama has surfaced and voluntarily placed himself in the hands of a group of concerned psychiatrists. The group, which actively sought to interview Randal after he prophesied his own death, feared he had developed a martyr complex and that the priesthood was exploiting his condition. Our Karma reporter at the Sarsen Institute has learned that Randal is locked in isolation at his own request. This is to protect him from a demon spirit seeking to kill him before the rising of the full moon. Police officials believe the whole affair is a publicity stunt arranged by Randal, and Chief Elroy states that his officers won't disturb a huge Messiah gathering at the Rama Temple. Karma Channel expects to have the first report on that gathering and the identity of the new Messiah.

Silence reigned in the padded isolation cell; deep silence, like time had not yet begun. Randal sat on a stool, supporting his chin with his palm. His hair was flattened to a tangled mat of fine wire, and he was as content as a mad philosopher lost in abstract speculation. He was sure he'd foiled the evil spirit. Perhaps it would possess a Messiah and cast him out of his temples, but there were other temples in the sun. He himself was a temple in the sun of living energies, born to friendly elements, and a natural harbor for material comforts. Even here, locked in the den of madness, Randal drew on old confidence. He had built the church on that confidence, but it was more like a sickness now.

A sound broke the silence; it was the fall of a water drop, and it startled him. His vision blurred for a moment, then he saw that he was still in isolation, but not in a cell. His surroundings had changed. Featureless gray terrain ran off in all directions, and an ash-gray orb that was neither the sun nor the moon was high in a murky sky. A giant drop of blood fell on the horizon. With each drop, a dark hand was growing to cover more of the sky. It expanded until everything was in its swirling clutch. The wind rose and moaned like poison speech forming in the throat of a world-sized zombie, then it rushed in, thick with slippery fingers of hot sand.

Terrified and desperate to live, Randal shielded his face and struggled with his fate. When the sand thinned, a whirlwind threw sheets of cold rain. Hail and snow fell. Tormented and realizing that unholy death was upon him, he shook his fists and, through swollen blue lips, cursed the sky. A mix of elements answered by tearing at his flesh; sand stung and choked him, wind burned him, and his feet froze as he stumbled around in icy muck. He sank to his knees; his tears were frozen; he was blind; and the muck was hostile, cutting him like broken glass. Claws and dark hands groped, seized him, and slowly pulled him down, gasping, into the earth - into the earth with the dead, the damned, and the worm.

At the moonlit Rama Temple, a celebration of the Messiah was underway. Key members of the ecumenical priesthood were among the charged worshipers, leading them in a frenzied chant. Melanie, the chosen vessel, stood by the pulpit, her long dark hair and white robes shifting like dimensions to another

world. Behind her moon-pale, enraptured face, her spiritual powers were at work chasing out the visions that touched and controlled the minds of her priests.

In the wings, Dan Athusta was slipping a clip in a Colt 2000; he bit his lip at the thought of what he was going to do. He'd just witnessed the dried, mummified husk that remained of Randal at the Sarsen Institute and was now steadying himself to kill an evil Messiah. He didn't yet know the Messiah's identity, and he didn't think it would matter.

The long vaulted hallway leading to the main auditorium in the new dome was jammed with near-hysterical Children, a few of them in their second childhood, more than sixty years old. Dan began to move, slowly pushing his way through the chanting, babbling mob. His expression was cold, though beads of sweat rolled on his forehead. It was a tunnel to pandemonium; the swaying, stumbling Messiah celebrants had been either inspired or possessed to chant in every language but English. Over it all, a steady chant from the auditorium pounded like percussion. The closer he got to the huge moon gate entrance, the wilder the celebrants were - moving like madhouse marionettes with paste jewels, necklaces, and amulets they'd bought from the church, flying and twisting on their sweaty flesh.

Dan tried, but he couldn't establish normal eye contact or communication with any of them; they were oblivious to anything less than the supernatural, so he continued, forcing his way through and brushing people aside. Smoke from incense, herb, and bark offerings cloaked the hallway, giving it the appearance of an ancient painted cave. Celebrants that embraced him ecstatically and tried to force him to dance slowed his progress. He almost lost his gun. It wasn't his celebration; a grim mood seized his thoughts. He'd been fooling himself for too many years, identifying with the parade of occult figures he polished to respectability. Inside, he ached for a Messiah and a new and decisive force for higher religion, but self-delusion couldn't hold him - he knew the spirit that had destroyed Randal was evil, and if it were to direct a worldwide church, there would eventually be worldwide terror.

A tall black priest with waist-length dreadlocks guarded the moon gate. He looked fairly sober. Chanting celebrants were wedged into the gate, and there was no way Dan could get by them; he began to move them out of his way one by one. Then the black priest stepped out of his idol niche and used some form of invisible persuasion to make the crowd part for him. Dan let go of a Buddha-like man he'd been hustling out of the way and began to chant in Spanish, waiting for the priest to get close. Behind the priest's dreadlocks, his pupils began to telescope, shining with heightened awareness. He came up to Dan, stopped, and looked at him like a displeased father. Dan responded by delivering hard punches to the jaw and stomach, but the only effect was to stagger the priest.

Loud mocking laughter rolled off the priest's meaty lips, and while he was laughing, Dan made an assessment. Fighting this spirit-possessed priest would be a long, rough-and-tumble fight he might not win. Moving quickly forward, he threw a leg behind the priest and bowled him over, sending him tumbling among a clutch of leaping, trinket-dripping women. Having only a few moments, Dan leaped up, spread his arms and legs, and swam over a group of

people before he sank back to the floor. He was on his knees in the gate now, and he could see the priest parting the crowd behind him.

Staying on his knees, he drew his Colt 2000 and blasted two shots at the ceiling. The gunshots sounded like feeble firecrackers amid the general roar, but the priest retreated, and the gate crowd was stirred enough for him to force his way in.

He made his way along the wall, under glowing light panels. Smoke billowed in his face and stung his eyes. He planned to shoot the Messiah as soon as he could get a clear view of him. A turbaned man stumbled, knocking him into a sharp edge of stone. It was an empty pedestal. He winced, then jumped and climbed to the top of the pedestal.

Quick as a gunslinger, he drew his pistol and tried to spot the Messiah. Veils of colored light and smoke made it difficult. A moment later, his jaw dropped. Melanie was near the altar, white-robed and angelic. She was at the center of a choir-like formation of priests and priestesses that radiated down into the crowd like the arms of a starfish. Dan saw that the priests were leading the chant and had control over the Children.

He would have to act quickly if he was to act at all. If the priests spotted him, they could send a human wave to crush him like a bug. He hesitated; he couldn't bring himself to gun down Melanie, so he stashed his gun in his robe and dropped to the floor. Maybe it wasn't too late, maybe he could consult some friends and find a way to banish the spirit, or was he fooling himself again? His friends in occult circles would already be under the power of the spirit, so where could he go for help?

The loud chanting caused his head to spin. Dan fought against ringing ears, trying to organize his thoughts. He was suddenly seized from behind. A blunt object crunched against the back of his skull, and the chanting exploded into fireworks as he fell.

Consciousness returned like a series of veils being lifted. The Rama Temple drifted before him on a river of neon and moonlight. It was like he was looking up from the bottom of a hill to see it. The keep-like bell tower and its high battlement rocked, huge Gothic-arched windows and wheel windows trembled, and then the pile of white stone blocks that made up the old building became clear. At its rear was the shining, elongated dome that made up the new wing. Neon light streamed from a large sign on the tower and glittered on the jewels, rings, and ornaments of the people. It was like the crowd had been showered with stars. People milled, danced, and chanted on the street and in Swan Park by the dome. A paper-lantern full moon hung over the trees like a supernatural presence. Spirit magic pervaded the summer night.

Clenching his fists, Dan shook his head, throwing off grogginess and the night's hypnotism. He found himself in the front seat of a car on a side street facing the Rama Temple. He turned to face the driver and saw a stern man with a long, heavily lined face. Dan knew the man and was relieved to see him because it meant he wasn't in the hands of the priesthood.

"Chuck," Dan said. "How in the hell did I get here with you?"

"You were in the temple firing bullets at the ceiling," Chuck said.

"So the priests had me arrested?"

"No. I was inside in disguise. I decided to take you out."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet," Chuck pulled a bottle of scotch and a rock glass from a compartment under the dash. "Want a slug?"

Dan swallowed a double and was pleased as it washed away the pain and the aftertaste of perfumed smoke.

"The Chief has you marked as Krishna-crazy. He had you tailed when you ran out of the Sarsen Institute, figuring that the spirit had moved you to do something nuts. Word is you're to keep what you saw at the Sarsen out of the papers till an autopsy reveals what kind of poison Randal ingested."

"There is no poison that withers a man to a mummy in less than an hour. There wasn't a trace of blood left in Randal. It was like every life-giving fluid got sucked out of him by vampires. Not only that. There was an inch of dried mud on the floor, and there were claw prints in that mud. Claw prints belonging to beasts of some kind. Something got into that cell with Randal and killed him."

"That's not what I was told." A web of wrinkles gathered beneath Chuck's eyes, and Dan resented being stared at like he was a crazy Gypsy. "You better not attempt to stir up an international reaction to this Randal thing. You're in trouble as it is: We found no trace of violence at the monastery, and no trace of a rock slide at that cave. We assume that Nihil is around somewhere. Melanie and her priests say that you're as nuts as Randal was. Any more false reports or mischief, and we'll press a number of charges. Writing something crazy in the paper could be seen as mischief. The way it looks now, Randal was mad, and he poisoned himself in an attempt to gain status as a martyr. That's what you're to write."

Dan slammed his palm on the dashboard. "So, it's blackmail, is it! You can tell the Chief he can forget about burying this deal, because I know it's going to get uglier and the corpse is going to keep coming up."

"Maybe so, but it's still a police case. We will handle it. If you don't want to help us, then stay out of it. Write nothing, do nothing, and we won't put you in jail."

CHAPTER THREE: MUMMIFIED

"... yes, we're ecstatic at the Karma Channel, too. We all wanted the Messiah to be a woman, but shouldn't some of the Children be holding a mourning procession for Randal?"

"There will be plenty of time for mourning at Randal's funeral," said a young Oriental man with a corkscrew of hair falling down his back. "At the funeral we will see ..." The young man suddenly became stone-faced, his train of thought amputated. A moment later, his facial muscles twisted as he became possessed. "I am a spirit of Rama, and for truth I must prophesy. Randal's remains will not find rest on earth, and his soul will journey in the sacred spirit realm until the Messiah calls for his return...."

A prophet of Rama once proclaimed that all is a blaze of daylight, and darkness but a brief shadow cast by mortal hearts. In Toronto, the nights were getting longer, blazing lights sent brief shadows flying on every street and alley, and the heart of the city was an ebony skyscraper towering amid silver bands of moonlight. It was a building the police chief called the ghoulish slab; an unsettling building, it was the morgue and forensic science building, and it leaned black against the indigo sky, like a witness to the real and lasting power of darkness.

A solitary ambulance was parked in the back lot beneath a sign that said, ALL DELIVERIES AT THE REAR, PLEASE. Across the street, two gay bodybuilders watched from the YMCA parking lot as two slim ambulance attendants emerged from the glass doors and a security guard locked up behind them. Moments later, the ambulance's interior light winked on, and the youngest attendant inspected the rear.

"Hang on, Jake. Some pieces of that thing are still on the floor."

"So, sweep 'em out," Jake said. "Who's gonna know? The way they had us smuggle it over here, they're trying to get rid of it anyway."

"They want the public to think it's up on Elm Avenue, that's all. Cool it for a minute. I'll drop these pieces in a sterile jar and let the guard take them up - then we can cruise up the strip and score some of that weird smoke the Rama people are selling."

Pissed about being disturbed again, the guard thumped his book on the desk, barely missing the alarm button. He opened up for the attendant. It was Jake, and he wanted him to take a jar up and place it with the remains. Joe Landry nodded, agreeing, even though he had no desire to do anything immediately. He waited and watched the ambulance pull out, then he sat, put his feet up on the desk, and read another chapter of *The Brainiac*. In this chapter, the brainiac had hung up his chainsaw and was opening a skull with surgical tools. Joe found the author's knowledge of medical procedure and terms to be amazing. "Naw, naw," he suddenly said aloud, raising his finger as if he was lecturing an invisible man. "If the brainiac ever really wolfed down three cooked brains at once, the neuron-transmitters would overload his cortex, and he'd go crazy. Say, I bet the brain-eater would love this job. I could eat a brain if I wanted." Joe was feeling a sudden rush of power. He was alone in the forensic science building and therefore in control. The thrill was momentary, though, because Joe would never really touch dead meat. Sometimes his mouth watered when he read about gore, and whenever a fresh corpse came in, he would pull off the cover or unzip the bag and feast his eyes. He guessed he was a sort of voyeur. He didn't like touching people, whether they were alive or dead. Watching was his thing; Joe always took in the gay action near the YMCA parking lot, even though he wasn't gay himself.

Near the end of the chapter, Joe closed the dog-eared book and stuffed it in his pocket. He figured that a brain was something you had to dress up right if you wanted it to be more than stale gravy. Picking up the jar containing the Rama fragments, he strode past the elevator banks and went into the stairwell. The morgue was too modern a building to make for night jitters; he was afraid of getting stuck in the elevator more than anything else. An elevator had gotten him once before, and Janey Winters, his fiancée, had been with him. He'd panicked and torn her new dress as the relationship came to a claustrophobic end.

By the time he reached the fifth floor, he was winded; he couldn't really run six kilometers, as his résumé said. In fact, he couldn't even run around the block. At its maximum, the light dial produced a mild glow in a few of the panels. "Damn that conservation," he thought. "People don't see that the Earth has to run down and die like everything else."

Randal's remains were in room 512, and Joe entered it cautiously. This corpse was different; they'd practically smuggled it in, and it was supposed to be that wicked spirit channeler, Rama. Although he was anxious to view the remains, he still took time to make a tag for the jar. PARCHMENT FRAGMENTS FROM RAMA REMAINS, he wrote on a tag that was really designed for attachment to the toe of a corpse. One thing he'd learned from the brainiac was that everything had to be neatly tagged and shelved. Even skulls, the brainiac kept them in rows with pieces he'd sawed out and hinged back on - kind of like German beer tankards.

A different type of covering was on the Rama remains; it was like a thick blanket made of yellow plastic lead. After placing the jar on a counter, he rolled a gurney aside and slowly lifted the covering off the remains. His brows lifted in surprise, but his blue eyes remained bland, like he really wasn't all that surprised. Nothing was on the slab other than a heap of soiled linen, but it didn't worry him because the delivery could have been a ruse. The big shots probably still had Rama at Elm Avenue, but wanted some people to think he was here.

Putting the cover back, he looked around. He jumped; the parchment fragments were moving in the jar. Stepping over, he picked the jar up. "Holy shit!" he said as he gathered that the fragments were now live scarab beetles.

A long creak came from the door; he jumped and dropped the beetles. The jar smashed, and the insects crawled out of the broken glass. His hair began to rise, and he stepped back from the bugs. He could see nothing at the door, but he was still afraid to go over and check it. Downtown neon blazed outside the window; jumping from the fifth floor into the rear parking lot wasn't really an option, so he gulped and tiptoed to the door, wishing he had a gun. Taking a deep breath, he swung the door open. No one was there; it was only a draft from the air conditioner.

No one was in the hall either, but he was spooked. He clicked his heels to the elevator. God only knew what might be lurking in the stairwell. Immediately, one of the smooth metal doors opened. There was no light inside. Down the hall, the door creaked again. He slipped in and felt for the button second from the bottom, then he clenched his teeth to bear a few seconds of stark terror.

With a whir and a hum, the elevator descended. Near the bottom, the lights came on. Joe's teeth were clamped tight, and a look of grim idiocy was on his face. The look faded, and his eyes became like those of someone falling without a parachute. Something hideous was in the elevator with him. It was a mummy, and its cerements hung down like purple-gold and white corkscrew streamers. Dust fell as it lifted its arms. The nose was gone from its crumbling face, and a cold air of death issued from its moldering mouth. Its eyes were black like decayed night.

It seized Joe, cold fabric fingers locking an iron grip on his neck. The elevator rattled open, and the Randal mummy began slamming Joe into the button

panel. Rotten, spiked teeth sank into Joe's neck, and his lips pulled across his gums in a silent scream as he shivered and died.

On the fifth floor, the elevator rattled open. The mummy exhaled a warm red mist of juices it had sucked from Joe. It dragged the corpse back to room 512 and placed it on the slab. The dehydrated body was already rigid, Joe's fingers were locked on his copy of *The Brainiac*, and his arm crackled dryly as the mummy raised it. There was a sound like tearing linen as the mummy ripped into the right side of Joe's chest. It then went to the hallway and got a tiny vase of plastic flowers, which it stuffed in the cavity. Stepping back, the mummy groaned at the perfection of its work. The color had faded from Joe's uniform and flesh, his hair was a cobweb mop, cracked lips stretched over yellowed teeth in an expression of surprise and terror. The flowers protruded from his chest, and he held his copy of *The Brainiac* to his heart religiously.

Pools of moonlight glistened in the alley, and a crooked figure moved through the patches of light and shadow, limping slowly toward the sharp black outline of the morgue. Two mini-skirted hookers ducked to safety in a doorway as the man passed. Demons were on the man like vulture shadows; both supernatural demons and his own private demons tormented him. He cursed the night air and his fate. Whenever he came clear of the shadows, the mutilated left half of his face and white froth dripping from his bluish lips were revealed. Melanie's messianic will drove him on, and the demons allowed him no rest. "Nihil, Nihil, the crippled one," they whispered. And fresh outbursts of cursing flew from Nihil's throat each time the words burned across his mind.

When he reached the alley adjacent to the morgue, he stopped and took cover in the shadows, finding temporary relief there. The demons fell silent; he became blind to his bruised limbs and to the filthy ceremonial robe he wore.

Before Nihil's inner fires could cool to sparks, the Randal mummy appeared, dragging its feet across the parking lot to the alley. The alley breeze lifted the loose ends of its cerements, and they glittered like giant, silvered pencil shavings in the moonlight. Its eyes were bright and owl big as it approached the gutter, but at the gutter they blackened, and it fell to its knees and choked. A fountain of red liquid spewed out through pointed teeth and gushed over the pavement to a sewer grate. Over on the sidewalk, a middle-aged man in a white summer suit was passing. He stared in disbelief for a moment before beginning to run.

A rush of demon whispers ran through Nihil's head. "He must vomit up his sin." Final tongues of blue liquid oozed out, hitting the asphalt. The mummy moved weakly, trying to rise. Fearlessly Nihil moved out of the shadows and pulled a chain and harness from his robe. Thrusting forward, he seized the mummy and wrestled it down. It let out a gurgling moan, but the harness was fastened on swiftly. The mummy struggled, trying to free itself, but Nihil's demon-driven madness was the superior power. Overcome, the mummy rose and began to move forward like a yoked ox. The blaze of city lights faded to a weak phosphor glow as they moved ahead into the deeper darkness of a large park. High shouts, blaring horns, and other faint reverberations of the crowd noise from the distant Messiah celebrations carried through the oaks.

Averam's dark silhouette stood against the false dawn of four a.m. He was on the platform at the top of the bell tower of the Rama Temple, staring out moodily at the deep-purple sky. Below, on the street, the celebration was

mostly over; candlelight processions of Children were drifting through the city, only Children in deep trances and key members of the priesthood were still in the temple.

The bells tolled ominously, and they were real bells, not tapes of bells like Randal had used. A slender figure, hooded and dressed in black robes, joined Averam at the top.

"Come, Averam. The inner circle is gathering now." Melanie's porcelain-fine face was as pale and radiant as the moon. Her full lips were a temptation that placed every priest on trial. Standing against the night sky, she had romantic power no man could resist. Averam knew it was a stronger brew of the same power she'd had back when she was a pop vocalist, back before Randal had saved her from the hip capitalist evil lurking on the pages of social media.

Averam could do nothing other than obey, and he wanted to obey; his belief in the occult had always been as firmly rooted as his beard. He liked to remind people that he was the humble son of a carny fortuneteller, born in a tent during a séance. With a sure step, he followed Melanie down the scone-lit staircase to the second basement, where a stone door grated aside, and they followed a damp passage to an inner chamber.

Melanie pushed back her hood as they entered the cavernous chamber; her dark hair fell softly over her robe and shoulders. No signs of evil showed on her; people who didn't believe in her spiritual powers would find it hard to see her as anything other than a young pop singer playing Messiah for a greedy church.

Several priests and priestesses were already seated at a huge ebony table. All of them were dressed in black robes, underscoring the seriousness of the meeting. They rose and bowed their heads as Melanie took her place between two crystal dog idols at the head of the table. Light from the serpent candelabra on the table flickered in Averam's eyes. Something evil ignited in his breast. These meetings were about theology and power, and Averam loved power, especially the power of the judgments that were sometimes passed.

Lesser priests and priestesses filed in solemnly and took places farther from Melanie. Averam was about to signal the guards to seal the door when the sharp snap of a whip echoed from the stone walls. A moan and grim footsteps followed. Turkazim, two guards in leather harness, and a handsome young priest with bound wrists appeared. Turkazim's ebony face was slick with cooling sweat, and his expression was cruel and intense.

Melanie rose. "What is the meaning of this outrage? You dare commit atrocities at an ecumenical session!"

"I apologize," Turkazim said, bowing humbly. "I am administering the prescribed treatment for a priest who has betrayed his vows. In this case, it was the vow to celibacy that was broken."

"Where and when did this happen?" Melanie said.

"Tonight, on the grounds. He was caught having sex with a common prostitute, like a dog in the gutter."

The bound priest hung his head in a silent admission of guilt.

Fury filled Averam's eyes. He slammed his hand on the table. "We can't turn a blind eye to these abominable acts like other churches do! I recommend that we purify him with fire."

"I'll decide how he is to be purified," Melanie said. "Hold him outside the chamber for now."

Stone scraped harshly as the entrances were sealed. Turkazim took his place beside Averam.

A Nordic man with an explosion of red hair spoke. "There are new directions, new glories to fulfill us. I know how difficult it is for most of you to conceal your excitement. I think we should begin the meeting by having Melanie tell us about some of the spiritual gifts given in her honor."

"Thank you, Garth," Melanie said. She paused, her eyes glowing like pale crystal balls. "There are far too many gifts to mention now. We have more precious stones than we know what to do with. Cash gifts total up to three billion dollars, and gifts of land and church buildings total much more than that. We have no sure"

Averam suddenly choked. He covered his mouth with his hand and ran his forefinger over his nose emerald. A staring look was in his eyes, like he could see a mountain of jewels.

Melanie continued. "We have been in need of jewels for ceremonial dress for some time, but all the best stones are to be used in new idols."

"A practical decision," Garth said. "As you all know, I'm an idol worshiper. You can have nirvana, tongues, trances, and whatnot. Nothing draws in new members more effectively than potent idols and ecstatic dancing. Since we're on the subject, it brings to light an old question - are we to grant idol status to the new series of fertility gods proposed by the churches of our African Ether?"

Turkazim seized the moment. "I might remind this ecumenical body of the absolute loyalty of my African churches. Swift approval would be a proper reward and a sign to Ananda and the rebellious Eastern Church. Let them see what loyalty can accomplish."

"I agree," Melanie said, "but some of the fertility gods must be placed in Canada. We can use them to showcase our new stones."

"What are we going to do about the breakaway churches?" Luther, a local Krishna priest, said. "There are getting to be a lot of them. Perhaps we should cut off their funds until they obey."

"We cut off the Christian cultists last year," said Lana, who was both treasurer and Melanie's little sister. "It wasn't long before invaluable relics began to vanish. Randal never really did anything about the problem other than send in insurance investigators."

"I'm glad this subject has come up," Melanie said. "I've decided how we will deal with this problem and the problem of disobedience in general. Averam, Garth, and Turkazim are to be the backbone of a new disciplinary committee. They will use theology and persuasion to see to honesty and obedience in the Ethers. Resources will be provided as needed. Randal created most of the mess to begin with, so it will be up to him to clean some of it up. He will be the international head of the committee."

"What?" Averam said amid the stunned silence of the ecumenical body. "Randal has perished; how can he be the head of any committee?"

"Randal will be returning," Melanie said, smiling at a circle of astounded faces. "He is making a journey of atonement in the sacred spirit realm, but he will return to live out some final days on earth. Randal will be accorded the respect due to those returned from the dead, and he will work quietly behind the scenes. In the public forum, I will elevate the church to the status of the world's greatest religion, but let's not forget that the work behind the scenes is most important. Most of the large churches today have only television glamour and no substance. We are not going to imitate them."

"Randal has reason to dislike me," Turkazim said. "How will I work with him?"

"The Randal that returns will have been purified by the spirit of Rama," Melanie said. "He will have new beliefs. Randal perished because he had no faith, but his works were many. He is being rewarded because of his early work, building the church."

Some people nodded, others muttered. The discussion returned to more mundane matters.

Karl, a powerfully built blond priest with a Sinbad loop in his ear, was worried about theft. "New fertility gods and idols are going to be stolen. The stones we're using are just too valuable. I think we should use curses and poison to discourage theft."

"Curses profane the idols," Averam said. "But since you mention it, I can tell you that we have cursed Randal's remains. Anyone who even thinks of stealing the body will die."

"The curse on Randal should be enough," Garth said. "Rebels and thieves aren't much of a problem in the mainstream church."

"I had a problem with them last year," Turkazim said. "Idols were taken in Mombassa and I had to spend a month tracking the bandits. I finally caught up with them in the ruined city of Gedi."

"What happened to the bandits?" Garth said.

"Their skeletons hang in a tomb at Gedi."

"There are other steps I'm taking to protect our new properties," Melanie said. "The members of the new committee will be seeing to the breeding and placing of guardians in the temples."

"What are these guardians?" Averam said.

"That you will see shortly," Melanie said.

His perception of space shifted, and the bound priest saw the metal bars at the end of the hall rush up and stand before him like prison bars. He blinked, and his eyelids were still heavy from the dope he'd smoked during the celebration. Green moisture stains on the pitted stone walls shifted like ghosts, and in the dim yellow light, the effect made the corridor feel like an eerie walk leading to the cage of some beast. He hadn't seen this part of the temple before, but he knew people disappeared here. He remembered fury tensing his every muscle as he shouted loudly in favor of whippings that took place here. Murder had been a secret thing that happened, even though Randal was against it. Now he

would probably have his own innards torn out or be fed deadly snake venom. It was a matter of policy.

He knew no one in the church was celibate and that many members ate meat that hadn't been sacrificed to idols. The rules were all broken, but that was of no help to him now. His error was failing to maintain an acceptable level of secrecy. With a belly full of wine and a head full of dope, he'd broken the rules in public. A long time ago, Randal had warned him he would be consumed if he were foolish. Yet Randal hadn't followed his own advice and had been consumed and devoured.

Thoughts of escape seemed pointless. Where would he go? He was truly reborn because his past life was irretrievable. Rama voodoo had entered his soul, making the church his home. He remembered the spiritual person he'd been in his teenage years, but couldn't find any of that person left in him now, and he realized he would walk to his death, not just because he had nowhere else to go, but also because there was nothing left for him to care about. He had surrendered his soul, only to gain emptiness instead of the fulfillment promised.

A hangover haze mercifully muted his fear. One of the temple guards returned; something had darkened his mood, and the corner of his mouth ticked as he paced impatiently up and down the hall. The guard's near-naked body was covered with white ointment that kept the dampness back. It looked like there would be torture if the guard was prepared for a long stay below. They would burn the corruption from his soul with irons and oil and dab his ashes on the foreheads of praying priestesses. A long shiver shook him like a spook, reminding him of the weak nature of flesh and bone. Terrible sobriety was returning. If he had an enemy, it stood at the end of the corridor, a shadow between him and the peace he hoped for in the grave.

The shadow swept in, and the bars lifted. The guard cracked his whip. "Get moving, it's judgment day," he said.

It wasn't a cell or a medieval torture chamber as he'd expected; he found himself on shaky legs walking out onto an enormous idol platform. A nine-foot snake idol was at the center, and the snake was poised on its coils. A cobra hood and the hideous face of a snake man towered over him as the idol began shifting in a slow charm dance; he blinked and shook his head, and when he looked again, the cobra was solid blue jade. A large ruby was in its mouth.

Icy hands gripped him, and the tallest guard dragged him closer to the idol. An oversized head on the guard and his lumbering movements made him seem like a strange Frankenstein monster. The guard's face showed exertion but no emotion as he fastened him by the wrists to a high coil. Half hanging from the idol, the priest watched the guard step down from the platform. A number of faces showed in the dim light down on the floor, in most cases, he saw only slit, hostile eyes under black hoods.

A vague and unreal shadow became clear and took human form. It was Melanie. A storm of emotion was in her eyes; it was the malevolent hate she saved for scorned lovers and betrayers caught in the act. She held a small silver tray in her palm; her eyes burned into him steadily as she walked toward him.

He opened his mouth to beg, but the words froze in his throat, and he put out his tongue and was unable to retract it.

"You have broken your vows," Melanie said, her voice a hiss. "Your sentence is death." She touched her fingertip to a tiny red drop on the plate and placed it on the tip of his tongue.

It burned like acid; he bit his tongue, and the blood ran bitter. Moments later, Melanie's beauty vanished like a veil. A rot-dripping skull was before him. Maggots crawled in the eyeholes, and bits of red tissue fell to the floor. She tore her black robe open; decayed and blistered flesh showed. With the agility of a ballet dancer, she leaped on him, fastened herself tight, and kissed him fiercely. Her loins rocked against him, and he tried to scream as vile juices poured from her mouth and burned him. After a few moments of gagging horror, he fell unconscious.

A flash of his mental phosphors brought him around. Melanie was gone, and he was naked. The foul odor creeping from his flesh almost made him vomit. Bleeding scratches covered his body; he felt like he'd been dragged through a bed of thorns. His head hung down, and he could see that his genitals were now swollen and deformed. Dry hissing emerged when he tried to moan. The venom he'd swallowed was bringing about an ugly state of heightened awareness, making the dim light daylight-bright. He could see every speck on the marble altar; scarlet curtains ringed the platform, and there was a beastly face swirl-painted on the ceiling. Priests and priestesses watched from below. Aged and fissured blocks of gray stone made up the wall behind them. He wished the wall would tumble down and crush them so he could die free of cruel eyes.

Something huge was moving behind the curtains; it brushed against them, rocking them, almost knocking them down. Then a massive thing came into view. He saw a face like the snake man's on the idol, then the face of a tormented human being, and the face of a god from the Northern pantheon. An unspeakable thing was slithering over the platform. It was slimy like a giant slug, but set into the jellied flesh were hundreds of faces. Some of the faces were tormented, some were repulsive, and he was aware of all the faces through a horrifying power the poison had given him - a power that made him choke. His terror and agony were one with the terror and agony of those already devoured. He had already been swept up by the same evil power. Struggling, he squirmed, and his chest heaved. When he couldn't break free, he tried to vanquish the faces by looking to the ceiling. Smoke billowed; the swirling demon was on fire, and he was forced to lower his stinging eyes and watch Melanie's guardian approach.

The slug-like guardian slithered up close and rose like a cresting wave, then his screams and death agonies made even Averam shake. Slowly, the slug toppled over on him, catching him like a glove. A red stain spread as its hungry mouths fed, devouring his body. Everything was swallowed, except for his face - it found its own special place of torment on the slug's body.

Averam, Turkazim, and Garth were too impressed to speak; Melanie's voice passed into their ears like music. The vile beauty of the guardian had possessed them. They were aware of the power they would wield and were looking forward to the new varieties of guardians they would breed and place in temples around the world. Melanie had shown them the power of a Messiah,

and she'd given them the power they'd dreamed of - they loved her, and would worship her forever.

CHAPTER FOUR: SACRED REALM

Sunlight reached through a crack in the silver-and-red lined curtains, touching Dan Athusta's forehead and waking him quick like a lover's hand. For the first time in months, he'd slept in. The Randal tragedy had left him exhausted; he'd thrown his clothes and jewelry in a heap on the white pile rug and slept naked.

Water bubbled from a ram's head tap into a basin set in a brass counter by the bed. Dan rose, washed his hands and face with cream, shaved, used some Indian perfume, and then went to his closet. He put on light-blue calf-length trousers, a T-shirt with a sun explosion, and handmade moccasins. To complete his outfit, he selected an ivory moon-style watch, a necklace of large wooden beads, and a crystal belt buckle. His Sun Karma pocket phone remained dead, as he didn't want to be overwhelmed by a buzz of voices, texts, and videos requesting articles about Randal's death and the new Messiah. Somehow, he didn't feel like playing the hero journalist, challenging the censors at the police department - not yet anyway.

Dan needed a breath of fresh air, so he went out the bedroom's back door and down the curving toss of steps leading to the back patio. Sun dazzles and rainbows from a thousand pieces of crystal on the patio almost blinded him. Dan had enough statuettes, ornaments, and bric-a-brac amid the flowers and greenery to crystal-heal an army. Today, he felt like smashing everything; it all glittered with promise, and then in the end, it couldn't save your soul any more than fool's gold could. He wondered if there was anyone who wasn't false, evil, or deluded.

From the bottom of the stairs, he could see over his back lilac hedge and down into the big ravine that ran behind his house. A group of white-robed children was walking down the winding asphalt ravine path on a shortcut to the heart of Toronto. Dan shook his head; no doubt, this was a sign that he'd be seeing them everywhere as Melanie's powers expanded the church.

Patterns of sun and shadow gave the day a nice visual dimension, and the soothing motion drew him into the quieter patio world. He sat on a driftwood chair and let a medley of flower fragrances uplift him. A moment's rest, and his inner vision was clearing. Yesterday, he'd been willing to shoot the Messiah down like a dog; today, he was ashamed of his actions, like he'd been drunk and was paying the price of recollection. Half the world was always being damaged and devoured by false religions, or should he say false beliefs, to cover fascism and all the other humanity-withering horrors? Why should he damn himself to rid the world of an evil Messiah? The evil would only come again.

His thoughts drifted underwater to corals and silvery fish. He easily had enough money for a year off; time he could spend deep-sea diving or even trekking down Rocky Mountain trails far away from the chanting crowd. His daughter, Sheila, would likely be game for some new outdoor adventures, and

upon his return, he could explore some saner career options. Still, throwing everything away would be hard; he had always been proud of the career he'd created - proud that he'd seen a new age opening and a vision of being that world's premiere writer. And that was back when there were only a few visionaries looking for a new god. People like Randal, who rose from the sackcloth and ashes of holy poverty to drive the con men from the temples and build a world rededicated to the spiritual good of man.

They'd missed the narrow way, though; the corporate towers they were supposed to demolish opened their jeweled gates and manipulated them like they were toy plastic voodoo dolls. A sad truth of life was that people only wished to be comfortable until they died; whether they slept on beds of nails or dreamed with alien spirits, a measure of the easy life and recognition was all they wanted. With life a comfortable tomb, who could be aware of the stars? Dan knew the true goal of religion wasn't to drop out of society. The cultists could believe that, but he believed in a religion that lifted people out of the tomb. Their transformation made society vibrant and dynamic. God on earth was a life higher than stupid contentment. Dan wondered why people were no longer transformed; even fanatics like the Children weren't truly religious. They wanted a Messiah to believe in because they could find nothing in themselves worth believing in.

The tinted patio doors opened, and Dan's reflections ceased. His daughter appeared; Sheila still looked like a tomboy even though she was twenty.

"Good morning," she said, barely glancing at him as she carried her breakfast tray over to a pedestal table. It was like he was a familiar statue.

"Don't you find pancakes and bacon hard on the stomach?" he said, watching her short red curls bob as she swallowed a greasy slice of bacon with orange juice.

"They're not nearly as bad as those little bags of weeds you eat, so don't knock them."

"Yeah, well, I'm giving up on the healthy weeds and going back to regular food for a while."

"Really. Did you get permission from the goddess?"

"I'm not a follower of Melanie if that's what you mean."

"I find that surprising. I expected you to be on her lap, writing flowery prose."

"That'll be enough of that. The truth is that her church has grown too big and is an instrument of evil."

"What's new about that? Before Melanie, Randal was the only person in it sane enough to present to the public."

"They weren't all that bad. There were a few corrupt priests." Dan grinned; only yesterday, he would've been shaking his head over his failure to elevate his daughter above atheism. Today, he was glad she was beyond Melanie's power.

"From what I've seen on TV, Randal is still in more demand than Melanie. Reporters are roaming about like packs of wolves, trying to get the whole story on his death. I thought you'd be down at the forensic science building with the rest of them, demanding to see the body. Your pal, Glen Connors, claims

Randal was torn apart by a werewolf on the grounds of the Sarsen Institute. Says the corpse will prove it."

"I was there when the body was first discovered. At that time, the tabloid press wolves were only interested in covering the temple action. I don't think any of them even got inside the temple. It took them half the night to find out that Melanie had been chosen. The identity of the Messiah wasn't my first priority, so I was on the grounds of the Sarsen Institute, watching for any sort of wolves that might murder Randal. None showed up."

"I guess you never believed Randal was nuts enough to kill himself?"

"Randal was putting up a hell of a fight to stay alive. I saw the remains. It wasn't poison."

"Chief Elroy won't let anyone view the body before the wake. A mob of Children was at police headquarters this morning, demanding the body not be desecrated by forensic experts."

"What does the Chief say to that?"

"He says there were only blood tests to determine what sort of poison Randal ingested. It may take some time for the final results because Randal could've got hold of all sorts of rare poisons. It's not a murder probe, so there were no incisions or dismemberment."

"Chief Elroy knows that no poison or human beings could've done a job like that on Randal. He might want to call it suicide, but there are too many interested parties for him to succeed with a cover-up. Eventually, some ghoul will get hold of Randal's remains, and the story will come out."

"Why weren't you at the Karma Channel testifying to what you saw?"

"I had a chat with Chuck Tyson - you know, Chief Elroy's brutal right arm. He has charges, he says he'll raise on me if I don't keep quiet."

"And you're submitting to his blackmail?"

"Not really. I'm tired of the whole Seven Ethers affair. If I step forward as the central witness in this controversy, I'll never get any peace. Chuck wouldn't charge me anyway; too many people would smell a rat. The Chief doesn't want more of that sort of publicity. I thought maybe we could take a vacation. You know. Go somewhere till I decide what to do next?"

"You mean a trip that doesn't involve weird mumblers and crackpots?"

"Yeah, the sort of vacation your mother would like."

"Maybe you should call her. She might end the separation if you promise to stop globetrotting with gurus."

"She has her own life now," Dan said, wishing he didn't have to shatter Sheila's hopes for reconciliation. "Don't dump the rest of those pancakes. I'm famished."

"By the way," Sheila said. "Len and his daughter are on the way from the airport. Maybe we can do some vacationing with them?"

"What?" Dan said, nearly spitting his pancake out. "I didn't know Len was coming."

"You weren't around for me to tell you."

Dan nodded, realizing he hadn't been around much. The talk returned to his separation, and he found himself humoring Sheila. He knew his marriage was likely over, and he also knew that Sheila would never believe it. Twenty minutes passed, then the door chimes tinkled on the patio, allowing him to escape the painful conversation.

Sheila got the door and a minute later led Len and his daughter out onto the flagstones. Len was as lean and wiry as ever, wearing a light-brown summer suit. His blue eyes still carried a youthful sparkle, though he was sixty-five. Those eyes could cut right through a person as Len's mood shifted from jovial to overly serious. His wide mouth made for taut facial expressions, and the slight hook in his nose helped to emphasize both lightness of being and emotional intensity.

"Nice to see you, Len. What blew you into town?" Dan said as he noticed that Len's daughter was Sheila's opposite - pale, without muscle, and withdrawn. She was also very attractive with flowing dark hair and the profile of a cameo beauty. Her loose yellow sundress and Sheila's red jogging outfit stood in contrast in a way that didn't benefit Sheila.

"The usual blew me in," Len said. He put one foot on a painted stone and toyed with a silky white plume of pampas grass growing in a barrel beside him. "I'm still doing research. I want to complete the histories of a couple of Nazis who died here in Toronto. Of course, there are those who deny that these men ever were Nazis. This lovely lady is my daughter Jennifer. She's traveling with me nowadays, helping me with my work."

"Glad to meet you, Jennifer," Dan said.

Jennifer smiled. "I've heard a lot about you."

Dan grinned, secretly afraid of what she might have heard. He turned back to Len. "Where have you been hiding her all these years?"

"I haven't been hiding her. She's never been well enough to travel, at least not until now. She has special sensitivities like me, but with her, they are often incapacitating."

"Special sensitivities." Dan laughed, remembering that he'd met Len back when the occult and religion weren't quite as heavily mixed. Len had been traveling as a mind reader, using it for a cover while investigating a Nazi-type cult. Dan was a young journalist trying to prove Len a fraud. In the end, Len admitted he couldn't read minds but said he had special sensitivities, which, in his case, meant that when he touched people, he would feel what they felt. Once he knew a person's emotional state, mind-reading was easy.

"Jennifer has a special sense for danger; she gets jittery before accidents, murders, and other disturbing happenings," Len said. "Her feelings have been bad since we got off the plane. Does that tell you anything about the situation here?"

"It's a big accident waiting to happen," Sheila said.

"My guess is that you're not really here for research," Dan said. "It has to do with the Rama Temple and the Children of the Seven Ethers. The reason Jennifer is getting the jitters is that the city is a well of evil spirits. The power emanates from the Messiah. I hope you're not going to try to fight her?"

"She's too strong for me. I'm glad you know she's evil. I expected you to be in this with her. Whatever opened your eyes didn't open anybody else's. I can't find anything but praise for the Messiah."

"I saw Randal's remains and a few other things. Whatever the messianic spirit of Rama is, it isn't God, although it is cosmic in nature."

"Have your feelings concerning God been altered?"

"My beliefs have been shaken. Many of the things I thought belonged to God have turned out to be evil. I have always been aware that there is a God, through my spiritual nature, but never before have I been so acutely aware of evil beings and the way they mask themselves as God. I wonder what the extent of the new evil will be. Does Melanie only want to deceive people, or is something bigger in the wind? I shouldn't tell you this, but I nearly shot Melanie."

"Yes, and you were unable to pull the trigger. You were close to Melanie once and want to believe the spirit can be driven out of her."

"You're still a mind reader, Len."

"Melanie had to be corrupt, a willing vessel, otherwise the spirit wouldn't have entered her. She won't be killed by bullets or saved by exorcism, and her miracles will be evil ones. She'll send out a spirit of death embodied as evil monsters, plagues, and doom. I came here with the idea that I might be able to block some of her works."

"You say monsters. I believe Randal was destroyed by spirits like monsters. Possibly because he struggled with the spirit and didn't take his place as Messiah."

"Randal was a fool," Len said. "He failed to see the great evil he was building. I touched him years ago, and his mind was clear then, but when I touched him at the altar in La Paz this year, his faith was gone. The spirit he conjured must have caught him by surprise. Nevertheless, he didn't perish. The prophecies of demons are lies. If Randal was taken unnaturally into death, he has to be returned. When he returns, he'll most likely be something we have to destroy."

"There's nothing left of him to speak of," Dan said. "His body is like a mummy's - dry as parchment. I can't imagine him ever coming back to life."

"If he was drained, then his spirit and lifeblood have been taken. His remains are an open nest for demonic spirits. I have to see those remains."

"Ah," Sheila said. "Now we're in league with the rest of the crazies who must see Randal's remains."

"Let's check the Karma channel," Dan said. "We can see when the wake is."

Soft earth rumbled and rolled like flesh moving on the back of an angry beast. Randal's spirit awoke under a damp shroud of soil, worms, and roots. A torch flared, lighting up the cave-big throat of a behemoth. His being hissed out of a tube, and he was alive as a form of smoke. Blood began to drip from a pustule as big as a stalactite, and the drops splattered on a blackened tongue that slithered and curled. A bruise-black tumor expanded and became a fetus; white worms burrowed into it, twisted and hardened to bones. Blood thickened to contaminated flesh, then the fetus grew to the size of a man, and a robe was cast on its back.

Randal's spirit dissolved. It was sucked down; the smoke whirling, molding the body to a strange likeness of his earthly self, then the tongue heaved and vomited him out of the earth in the sacred spirit realm.

He brushed cobwebbed filth from his shoulders; he was on his knees in wet black sand. It was the shore of a sea. Dull black waves rode in like mountains, lost their foundation, lifted slowly, and broke to lips of bloody foam that rushed up the headland with a roar. Sounds of distant tumult and the ceaseless cries of the damned were carried on the red water.

The water reached him and spilled over his ankles, burning him like fire, adding his cry to the roaring. Randal retreated, his flesh recoiling with the fear of the damned. Muck squeezed through his toes and tore scales of dead skin from his swollen feet as he walked toward cliffs high enough to belong to Mars. A profusion of distorted faces ran in the shadows bearding the cliffs, and a hot white sun stood back of the overhang at the top. Behind the sun's flashing beams, a skull - far too fierce to be human - was outlined. Patches of black cloud scudded round the orb like lustreless hair; filaments of fire burned away any straying mist and kept the skull-face clear.

An ear-shattering bird cry rent the sky, sent boulders crashing down the cliffs, and numerous scorpions scattering from crevices. Randal cowered, expecting the boulders to crush him. They thundered up dust around him, and a shadow fell over him. Zygodactyl claws seized him and carried him aloft.

Lifting his frightened face, he looked at the winged creature that had snatched him; its broad gray wings were sweeping back, humming with the wind. The whole body glowed, and the head was beaked, though batlike. It was a bird of prehistoric dimensions.

Its piercing cries jolted him and silenced the tumult, and it flew on in silence over the sea, away from the demon sun. An archipelago appeared, set on the water in a white and orderly fashion like a witch doctor's cast-off necklace of woven bones.

The deadly creature swooped from the sky at a terrifying speed, flashing over a forest of twisted, dark palms. Clearings cut into the trees showed as a checkerboard of color. The bird creature slowed, and he began to see things below: huts with thatched, conical roofs and enormous fire pits near idol platforms of mosaic stones. Human figures moved through the tall brown grass, but what startled him most were the idols. They were alive and walking on stout hind legs, all fours or crawling on their scaly bellies. He saw a monstrous man-wolf devour a wretched human, a serpent coiled amid a bowing aborigine tribe, and the brilliant feathered headdress of a naked woman as she leaped from a tree branch into the hungry jaws of a crocodile totem.

His hearing returned, and sound rushed in his ears; thudding drums, chants, songs, wicked squeals, roars, the thunder of massive feet and hooves, and the hiss of wind moving through the dry palms and brittle grass.

This ancient archipelago looked like a timeless place, severed from Earth and cast here into the realm of evil. Cauldrons forever steamed as hearts were torn out and flesh was offered up. Children lived only as food for beasts. Humans did not rule here, where their superstitions had come to life. It made Randal's breath whistle in his parched throat; he was repulsed and awed to think that

history was millions of years of this, with only a few short years marking the times of humanity and freedom, when people had chained the idols with the power of love.

Blood-tinted water rocked below as they raced toward another island; this one darkened by the ash-plume of a volcano. Fern and palm fronds rustled and scratched like crumbling paper on trees as straight and alike as windmills. Steep dunes ran along the shoreline. Kilometers of unbroken forest passed underneath, and Randal imagined that only darkness and the multilegged tropical things of it could exist under that dense and dying frond canopy.

A palace-like facade cut deep into the face of a cliff loomed out of the pall. Lightning flashed at the bottom, and crystal-faceted arrays of color from a wealth of minerals and gems in the steep-carved wall dazzled Randal.

Before they reached the cliff, the bird creature dipped and sent Randal tumbling on a hard bed of cracked mud. He managed to spring up and come to rest standing. Ashes were raining gently in the evening light, falling like peach-colored leaves. The air was fragrant with volcanic smoke and sweet-smelling earth mingled through with tangy scents of numerous herbs. Walls of tall brown grass towered on either side of him, dense and tangled enough to forbid a person without a machete entry. The patch of bare earth he'd landed on ran before him like a smooth dark carpet to what looked to be a throne near the breathtaking cliff.

There was nowhere else to go, so he walked under the heat lightning to his fate, feeling cleansed by the fragrant ashes gathering on him. Wary men with painted faces peeked at him through the tall grass, and at odd times, he saw quick movements of naked limbs, torsos, and breasts. Fear kept his gaze fixed mostly on the white throne ahead.

A lull in the breeze halted him; he was a short stone's throw from the throne. Its base was set on enormous claws like those of an ancient griffin, and the body of it rose up on piles of ivory bones. The bones ranged from the smallest, used to pattern ornate and gruesome details, to femurs running up the back that could pass for giant organ pipes. A headhunter's treasure of scalps and skulls hung from the wide arms on rawhide strings and bone arrowheads. Spear points formed jagged lines along the edges of the tall backrest. The occupant was more bones; a fierce giant skull like the one he'd seen in the sun lay tilted atop a heap of ashes and bones.

Randal shivered; the skull's eye sockets ignited, bright emerald and beryl with a stare that chilled his flesh to ice. With a great rattle, the pile of bones lifted, shooting up a geyser of ashes as it clicked together like a self-constructing puzzle. Open-mouthed, Randal stepped back - it towered over him, a manlike creature with sinewy flesh woven from fine bones. Energy glowed at its joints and with its every movement.

Randal's own bones shook. "My fate is in your hands," he said, awed by the evil creature.

"I am Tukoraka, father of all demons," said the giant, his voice rising deep and hot like the wind from the heart of a volcano. "I have sent out the spirits you call Rama and the Messiah. You know that I hold your fate. It is good that you have no illusions...."

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WAKE

Sheila was the first one up, and she would have popped back into bed had she not remembered the wake. A slave to necessity, she took a long shower, touched up her hair, and fished in her closet for a dress. Since it was a wake, she automatically looked for something somber, then she remembered it was Randal's wake and guessed that she didn't own anything so exciting that it would make her stand out next to the Children. She settled for a dark skirt and a white blouse. Make-up was another story; she rarely wore any, simply because she didn't want to bother with it. As an athlete, she felt content with the plain look; for the wake, she did her eyes and lips lightly in the modern, understated way.

It looked darn hot outside, so she slid open a window to check. Air like a steamy towel ballooned in with a bunch of mosquitoes that had been clinging to the damp sill. She'd discovered the hottest day of the year. A noisy flock of crows trekked across the sky. She imagined one of her father's spirit-struck friends would call the crows a bad omen and spend the day in the closet, and on this day, likely be right. Heat, as applied to wacko Children and desperate reporters, would mean trouble.

Bran flakes, milk, snatches of the newspaper, and the hum of the air conditioner were her reality as her thoughts climbed up from dream languages to sensibility. She heard some banging overhead, then Dan thumped down the stairs and went straight to the fridge. Sheila frowned over the newspaper as he drank milk straight from the carton. He was wearing a blue suit, a tie with the planets splashed on it, and a crystal earring.

"We'll pop over to the Wayfarer Inn and get Len and Jenny. Then we'll go over to the funeral home," Dan said. "We can use the old car."

Sheila put down her paper. "Have you ever been to that funeral home? It's called the Lotus Flower."

"I sure have. I sold six articles, photos, and a video on its architecture. Actually, it was the cemeteries Randal bought with the funeral home that caused a big stir in the public arena. People didn't like the idea of large non-Christian cemeteries. It's not an issue now, and the church is in the city's good books because The Lotus Flower provides many free wakes. The Rama church buries most of the city's bums, bag ladies, and others who have fallen through the cracks. The church also has a strong lobby at city hall. They protect their interests."

"I thought the Children were forbidden any political involvement?"

"You wouldn't see them at any ordinary protest, but woe to any candidate who opposes them. It was Tony Ceruli who tried to stop the construction of The Lotus Flower. When the election came up, his riding was swarming with door-knocking Children. All of them dressed clean, saying they were citizens concerned about his ties with developers."

Sheila opened the paper on the weather report. "This heat is the sticky kind. If there's a mob, Jennifer might collapse."

"A crowd will be filing through The Lotus Flower all day. Let's ring Len and go early, before it gets too hot. I'm going to skip breakfast, and I think I'll bring along a change of clothes."

The blanket of hazy heat had kept the streets empty; the neighborhood was like a silent desert. Dan didn't see a soul as he followed his usual winding way out of Castle Hill's protective maze of streets. He drove past the last of the stately houses and down a steep hill to the freeway, gaining a fuzzy view of the downtown scrapers. It was only a short scoot through the smog to Len's hotel, and Dan went down the canopied walk and found Len and Jennifer waiting in the lobby. Jennifer looked surprisingly sweet, her black-and-white dress enhancing the rosy color on her cheeks.

"It's a scorcher," Len said as they made their way to the car.

"When I think of Canada, I think of sugary snow covering maples and countryside," Jennifer said. "Then I arrive and find something totally different."

"You forgot about summer. And the world is getting warmer," Dan said. "We should feel guilty here. In the future, we might get a few palm trees while the people in Texas get fried alive."

"People will have to relocate according to the climate," Len said. "It's too late to stop the changes."

"We'll need some rain worldwide," Dan said. "I mean the sort of rain that helps free countries grow."

"It is true that tyrants and war are still killing more people than climate," Jennifer said. "Fascism and oppression have a thousand forms and faces now. Father and I have worked to oppose fascism as it appears in religion."

"Randal ran a fascist cult of personality to an extent," Dan said. "He was vain, but he was also clever, though he was never as diabolically clever as the people in charge now."

"We may be the only people who have an idea of Melanie's real power," Len said. "She wasn't made a Messiah just so the church can rake in some gold. We have to find out what their larger plan is."

"Maybe the church will keep its evil internal," Sheila said, "and we're sticking our necks out for nothing."

"I think Len is right," Dan said, frowning his brow. "A Messiah is someone who changes the world. And if the Messiah is evil, then we'd better take action before it's too late."

Light traffic ended, and a crowd came into view on the scorched concrete and heat shimmers of Central Avenue. Dan turned and glided quickly into the parking lot. The block of the avenue containing The Lotus Flower was sealed off by roll-out fencing and orange plastic markers. Behind the special checkered-cap police and the fence, the street streamed with pedestrians. Street meat and ice cream vendors, T-shirt and button pushers hawked their wares, but only a single cart selling natural foods and beverages was allowed up to the funeral home. If it weren't for the presence of many Children, it would have been close to the scene outside a baseball game.

"This is a sweat circus," Sheila said, squinting through the glare from the hood.

They all had an unpleasant word or two to describe the heat as they got out; the scrawny trees on the avenue provided no relief, and their wilted look added to weak feelings. A good view of The Lotus Flower showed as they filed through the fence opening and past the police. Its gallery front ran out to the walk, along it in rows of small Egyptian columns, providing precious shade that the crowd hugged. The line-up to the main door was thick, and it didn't appear to be moving at all. Hucksters screamed in their ears; not quite sure what to do, they stopped in the street and looked at one another.

Dan noticed that Jennifer was wilting and took her arm. "We'll never get through that line-up. Most of these people are being turned away. Maybe there's a way I can use my press credentials to get us in."

"Something ugly is going on inside," Jennifer said. "I can almost smell the illness and death."

"That's the air you'd expect Randal to have," Len said.

Sheila scanned the crowd and spotted a priest. His funeral garb was a purple tunic decorated with a gold motif of shield-like lotus flowers. "Try talking to that guy, Dad," she said.

Dan let Sheila take Jennifer and plunged into the crowd. He caught up with the priest and, after a few words, signaled the others to follow. They knifed through the crowd, following Dan and the priest to a side alley where a gang of loud men waited by a fire door.

"Look! It's Dan Athusta," Glen Connors said, his bloodshot eyes flashing. "We thought the elements fried you. I guess you've been hiding from those monsters that got Randal?"

"There were no monsters. You must be on drugs to report the stuff you do."

Glen wiped away some powder caked on his forehead. "I'm on a spiritual high. Say, who's the guy with you, an expert you brought in to declare the body a fake?"

"Len is a mind reader and an old friend of Randal's. We came to pay our last respects. I hope you'll keep your hands off the body."

Sheila suddenly slapped her thigh and laughed. "What's with the priestly outfit, Glen? You look like a tacky version of one of the priests."

The priest stepped from the doorway and spoke, cutting off Glen's reply. "Mr. Connors and his colleagues like to use disguises, but no disguise can hide the unholy odors of meat and drink on their breath."

Dan studied the heat-rumpled band of reporters and journalists. At least half of them were dressed as Children. "What are you guys trying to prove?" he said.

"That this mortician or priest - whatever he is - is giving us a crock of shit," Glen said. "That's not Randal's body in there, and he wasn't consumed by the elements. We now believe that Randal was injured while channeling demons and has been hidden somewhere."

"The priest is telling the truth," Dan said. "I saw Randal's body. His death, though indoors, was caused by exposure as the prophecy predicted. You people would get better news if you covered Melanie's activities. Chasing the dead is a waste of time."

"There you have it," the priest said, pursing his thin lips. "The word of an eyewitness. You people should leave us alone and spend some time questioning the police on their phony poison story."

"You want to repeat what you just said, Dan?" said Jacky Smothers, a reporter for the Karma channel. "I had my recorder off. Better yet, come with me after. Karma Channel News wants an exclusive interview, detailing your eyewitness account."

"Not a chance. I don't want this gang of tabloid and internet mystics accusing me of being in league with demons, kidnappers, or whatever else they think got Randal."

"Glen, Glen!" shouted a dirty-faced twelve-year-old boy dashing up the alley from the rear of The Lotus Flower. Ducking and squirming, he barely avoided being seized by the other reporters and stopped in front of Glen. He held a grubby hand out for money.

"Speak up! What is it, boy?" Glen said. He grabbed the panting boy by the T-shirt and shook him.

"People are getting sick," the boy said. "They're running out and heaving the chow at the back. Some of them are getting into ambulances."

"Really," Glen said, rolling his bloodshot eyes. "They must be showing some kind of grisly remains in there."

"You've got to let us inside, people may be dying!" shouted David Marley, a black journalist for Crystal Millennium. He rushed the priest, the zigzags shaved into his hair making him look even faster than he was.

"It's nothing!" the priest shouted, trying to push Marley back. "The spirit of death is still with the body. People who get too close get affected by it."

"Bullshit!" Glen yelled. "Let's get this creep out of the way and get in before it's too late!"

Profane words, excited voices, and an ambulance siren echoed in the alley as the mob of reporters surged forward. The priest got dumped aside like a bag of trash, and Marley pulled out a metal tool and forced the lock. Dan ducked back, pulling Jennifer to safety with him as the door was flung open. The mob stormed into The Lotus Flower; moments later, Len, Dan, the women, and the dazed priest were alone in the alley.

"You're the mind reader, Len," Dan said. "Should we go in?"

Len grinned, skin stretching from his jaw like bands of leather. "We can go in, but don't exert yourself. Try to steel yourself against the nausea. We should be able to stand a few minutes of it."

They experienced a single pleasant moment as they stepped inside onto plush red carpeting, then an intense wave of gut-wrenching nausea engulfed them. Chandeliers glowed dimly, paling and adding streaks of bruise-purple to people's skin. Fingers of drafty, refrigerated air raised gooseflesh, and a sweet, poison odor flowed like nectar from flowers placed everywhere in baskets, vases, and tubs. Weakened mourners sat half-collapsed in chairs and on polished benches at the rear of the high-ceilinged room. Other visitors wandered about like they were lost, some of them pointlessly circling the many idol likenesses standing in the room.

Dan, Len, and the women found that being prepared made the experience easier to handle. They looked around the room for the reporters and spotted them up near the front by a squatting Pan idol. Randal's corpse was there in a stone sarcophagus decorated with Eastern inscriptions. It was open, and a rich, pearly clamshell interior composed of various bone-like substances was visible. The sarcophagus was on a low platform, and they needed to get closer to view the body.

Five priestesses in lotus-decorated gowns encircled the rear of the sarcophagus; they stood grim and stiff, their faces pale and staring. The reporters looked miserable, some of them gasping for air like beached fish. Dan guessed that the burst of adrenaline that carried them in had quickly turned into a shivering rush of illness. Some reporters held friends for support. Others leaned against a large stone column. None was strong enough to approach the coffin.

As Dan's eyes adjusted, he spotted Glen on his knees near a curtained exit; his boy assistant held a bronze basin with dragon-tail handles, and Glen was emptying the contents of his stomach into it.

Jennifer seemed okay, so Len tapped Dan on the shoulder. "Let's go up and pass the body."

They moved calmly, keeping silent as they crossed the room, fighting the feeling of illness. Dan and Len were out front, trying to look strong while Sheila and Jennifer supported one another and trailed behind. Sensations of hopelessness passed through Dan. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead, his heart thudded like a bass drum, and the veins in his head began to throb, giving the feeling of being gripped at the temples by huge pincers. They shuffled past a tall bank of flowers and stopped by the open stone coffin. Randal looked to be at peace, but neither sick nor dead. It was more like he was asleep. The fresh body had rosy cheeks and almost seemed to be breathing. The corpse's hair was combed neatly into distinct, sweeping locks at the back, and the robe was of fine snow-white linen. Randal held a copy of his own book of meditations against his breast with a fleshy pink hand.

Dan raised his eyebrows and was about to step away when Len staggered slightly and dropped his pocket watch. He looked to Dan, and they bent down to look for it. Quickly covering the silver timepiece with his hand, Len pushed aside the curtain skirt covering the bottom of the platform. A lizard-like creature crouched in the semidarkness beneath the platform. Dan saw its eyes and was amazed; vile emanations touched him, and for a moment, he had to hold his rolling stomach. The creature crawled back into the darkness, but its thick snout and smoldering eyes remained visible.

Len let the skirting fall back in place, and they stood up, pretending to have seen nothing. Then, the four of them gazed at Randal for a few more moments. Len said a silent prayer, and when he was finished, they moved weakly away from the sarcophagus, headed for the exit.

It was an exit leading out to the back, and they hoped they could avoid some of the commotion by using it, but on the other side of the door, they found bright sunlight spotlighting another bad scene. Ambulances were parked askew, and police, sick people, and television cameras were stationed under a makeshift white medical canopy. Attendants were busy treating people who

had collapsed, and a doctor was passing out smelling ethers and anti-nausea drugs. A green supply truck from the public health department was pulling in.

Dan shivered as the heat killed the last of the repulsive feelings cloaking him. Jennifer felt a core of ice in her bones and shook so hard her teeth rattled. Len and Sheila gained instant full recovery.

"Uh-oh," Sheila said, tugging Dan's sleeve to bring his attention to a reporter and television camera approaching.

"I'll talk to him," Dan said. "Maybe I can help divert attention from Randal. It would be nice if we could investigate without a gang of reporters stumbling around in our way."

"Mr. Athusta," said the sandy-haired reporter. "Can you tell our viewers what is happening here?"

"Why don't you go in and see for yourself?"

"We have to respect the church's request for privacy. Tell me, why do you people look well when everyone else is exiting is ill?"

"We remained calm and didn't rush in. Excited people who rush from the heat into cold air conditioning often get sick."

"I hear they're burning something noxious in there?"

"There's nothing unhealthy in there. The wake is splendid, with an open coffin and priestesses in attendance. Randal never looked better. I think it's time to end the hysteria and let him rest in peace."

Two priests with large lotus flowers embroidered on their tunics appeared at the back exit, drawing the Karma Channel reporter away from Dan. As soon as the camera was gone, Dan led the way, and they passed through the makeshift hospital setup. As they reached the sidewalk, Dan spotted Chuck Tyson getting out of one of the green health department trucks. Chuck's prematurely wrinkled face gave him a look of authority as he hustled his long-limbed frame over to the priests. Dan figured that Chuck could be investigating the health problem, but most likely, he was covering it up as ordered by Chief Elroy.

Len suggested they get lunch, and Dan remembered he hadn't eaten a solid meal. Sheila was feeling famished, and she recommended a small restaurant nearby. She led them to a marble staircase that ran off Clavin Street into a vast underground mall. They took an air-conditioned route to the restaurant.

Wide polished floors, expensive boutiques, and crowds of business people made up the portion of the mall they were traveling through, and they were in the flow of the crowd before Len brought up the events at the wake.

"I'm a bit surprised, even though I expected to see something of that nature," Len said.

They stopped in front of a bookstore.

"Randal's corpse is a continuing miracle," Dan said. "I could swear I saw it breathing."

"Look carefully in the glass," Sheila said. "We're being followed by the bearded man across the aisle."

Dan studied the reflection in the glass for a moment. "It's Averam. We saw something at the wake we weren't supposed to see. Now we know for sure that Melanie knows about it."

"What exactly did we see?" Sheila said.

"A creature under the platform," Len said. "One that is stealing energy from the visitors and using it to rejuvenate Randal's corpse."

"Let's stroll through the store," Dan said. "We can watch Averam and see if he's alone."

They entered, and Jennifer led them down the rows of fiction paperbacks. She pretended to browse, picked up a book, and thumped it in her palm as they continued their conversation. On the other side of the glass, Averam shifted down and stood beside some booths. Shorn of his priestly robes, he looked like the fierce carnival gypsy he used to be, a wolf among the many mild-mannered office people.

"What did you pick up from the corpse, Dad?" Jennifer said.

"I felt a cold but living body. For a moment, I saw through its eyes. A blank vision. It's an empty shell. Neither Randal's spirit nor any other spirit is in it."

"What does that mean?" Sheila said.

"It means the body is being prepared for Randal's spiritual return," Len said. "Unless we drive a stake through the heart of the corpse, Randal will return as an evil being."

"If Randal must return, how can we prevent it?" Dan said.

"If we destroy his body, he'll return and then leave to wander in spirit realms," Len said.

"Randal's one thing, Melanie and her powers are another," Dan said.

"Maybe we won't succeed against her," Len said, his tone serious. "Nevertheless, they're after us now. The die has been cast. We have no choice but to move ahead."

"I was hoping Melanie wouldn't catch on to our activities," Dan said. "Now I see it won't be possible to operate that way." In the corner of his eye, he saw Averam slowly walking away, nodding his head and pulling his beard like he knew all he needed to know.

"We'll have to watch our backs every place we go," Sheila said as she watched Averam disappear in the crowd.

A silent moment passed, then they all shivered. They were sure the cold they felt was more than the air conditioning.

CHAPTER SIX: CEMETERY

The Toronto Cemetery of the Ethers rested in a long, narrow valley that ran from the perimeter of the north suburbs to a downtown neighborhood. A sprinkling of evergreens, some deciduous trees, and thick sumac bushes grew

on the steep valley side, giving the cemetery an air of the wild and isolation. Tonight, a long plume of smoky cloud blew beside the razor edge of the moon, and Glen Connors' latest rent-a-car sped on one of the two overpasses flung like hunchbacks over the cemetery.

Glen knocked back some amphetamines with a deep slug from a bottle of Canadian Club and grunted with satisfaction. Spotting something ahead, he began to swear like a sailor, and he pounded on the wheel as he drove straight ahead past the small parking lot on the road leading into the cemetery. It pissed Glen that the damn Rama people had constructed the cemetery with only one tiny entrance for vehicles, and the cops were parked in it.

A blur of lights ripped past like a neon picket fence. Glen savored the burn of the whiskey, then he skidded to a halt on the shoulder and got out. Sure enough, it was Chuck Tyson turning a carload of people away from the cemetery. Chuck was using a cruiser for wheels and wearing civilian clothes. Glen didn't have to think much to know he'd have to sneak in if he were to get in at all.

Reporter Connors had always been known as a man who wasn't afraid to break the rules, known as a gadfly journalist who was always pushing his luck. He smelled money in this story, big money - maybe even a book, and he wanted his face tagged to the publicity. His gut feeling said that in this case, the real story would be werewolf leaps and bounds better than anything his dull mind could fabricate.

Popping back behind the wheel, he ripped up gravel and took the first right turn, cruising into residential streets that ran at the edge of the valley cemetery. After a short drive, he found a lane that dead-ended at a field of weeds on the valley side and pulled in, parking behind two hydro trucks.

Glen looked plain, dressed in a dark brown shirt and black jeans. He had even thought of sooting his face for cover, but decided it might not be a good idea to look exactly like a burglar. He did feel like a burglar, and since most of his assignments involved forcing his way in, he supposed he was feeling the way he should.

Shuffling over the gravel strip to the valley side, he felt invisible and powerful. He patted the cloth bag stuffed in his pants, certain it was big enough to hold Randal's head. He grinned, finding it nice to imagine himself a headhunter. The truth was that his decision to take the head had more to do with his being far too out of shape to try moving a heavy corpse.

The valley appeared as a dark panorama at the edge of the field and quickly sucked the power out of his daydreams. Far below, in the eerie glow of a few yellowish lights, rows of statues and gravestones made an audience for the huge tomb set on the valley side. Randal's remains would without a doubt be behind the massive lintel and posts that made up the tomb front. It was hard to guess what else would be inside.

Humid air and hungry mosquitoes went to work, softening Glen up, and he had to remind himself that he was a hard-nosed reporter before he could make his feet start moving down the steep path. The path looked mean, angling down a thorny piece of valley side, catching the faint moonlight like a white scar on the bearded cheek of a giant.

It didn't take much tripping over exposed roots for him to feel like giving up. Gazing back, he saw rooftops running jagged against the sky like shards of broken glass and realized that trekking back up would be extremely difficult. Since there was no easy alternative, he kept moving toward the bottom, cringing every time he saw movement in the dry bushes. Dust, pollen, bits of weed, and bark stuck to his sweating face, making up for the soot he hadn't used. He hoped like hell he could find an easier path back up.

Near the bottom, his foot got lodged in a hole, and he nearly broke his ankle on the tumble off the path. He rolled through a patch of tall milkweed and came to rest face-up on the neatly trimmed grass. "Damn son of a bitch!" he said, holding his throbbing ankle.

After using the last of his whiskey as medicine, he looked up and surveyed the graveyard. A rock shaped to look like a grotesque human head was right in front of him, and he almost jumped up at the sight of it. Pain shot up his leg; he groaned, then noticed that the rocks were present throughout the graveyard - resting near the statues and stones. Randal's tomb was a football field away, across the valley. A small electric lantern cast shadows across the intricately carved lintel and illumined the big, brass-plated oak door. Glen felt little enthusiasm for it. It looked so much like a door that would close you up forever, he could almost hear it slamming behind him.

He hesitated, then thoughts of the money a piece of Randal would bring moved him, and he limped off through the statues and stones. He dreamed of the glory of a big scoop as his feet squished in the spongy turf.

Deeper in the graveyard, in an area of tall stones, two dark figures stood beside a statue of a cat goddess. They were hidden from Glen; hooded figures with black robes that swept the ground. They began to move in a slow dance, and the faint moonlight silvered their black obsidian masks. One of the figures was Melanie, and she was in the cemetery to add to the curse on Randal's remains. Pulling a sistrum rattle from her robe, she raised it and shook it gently. Doe toes and bear teeth tied to long locks of lifeless human hair beat a gentle tattoo against the wood.

The second masked person was the priest, Nigil, who turned to face the whispering rattle. He lifted his black-masked face to the sky, letting the demons run free in his mind as he quietly chanted out the words of the curse Melanie had taught him.

At the tomb, Glen began to realize what he was opposing. He was a dwarf next to the huge carved posts, and he figured the heavy lock on the door wasn't likely to give way to the chisel in his belt. It was a bit late for backing out, so he stepped under the huge lintel and jammed the chisel under the latch. He couldn't budge it, then he got an idea, went over, and picked up one of the strange stones. Being a man with a one-track mind, he never noticed the black robes fluttering among the statues a short distance away. He looked at the satyr face carved in the stone for a moment, then carried it unsteadily over to the door and banged its weight against the handle end of the chisel. The metal groaned, and the wood splintered. With the job underway, he threw the stone down, grabbed the chisel handle, and began to worry at the latch.

Power pulsed in the muscles and veins of his right arm; the latch began to creak back, bending like it was soft lead. With a final burst of strength, he

pried at the bolt structure and ripped it right out of the wood. Stepping back, he gazed at the twisted hunks of metal in his hands.

"How in the hell did I do that?" he muttered, then an idea came into his head. "It must be that whoever opens the tomb first inherits supernatural power. That's it. I'm going to inherit Randal's spiritual powers - the charismata. I've got to get to the coffin before someone else shows."

Red eyes smoldered behind the obsidian masks. Melanie shook her rattle, and Nigil's whispered chant grew furious, diabolical in its inhuman utterances; it became filled with the tones and whispers of a thousand demons. They sighed out their ecstasy, torment, cruel glee, and mockery of the moaning damned. In shadow, they drifted, wisps of blackened smoke floating to the tomb.

Glen heard and saw nothing as he pulled the heavy door open. A slat of light from the electric lantern fell in the doorway like a carpet bidding him entrance. It was murky inside; black dust was in the air, but it didn't frighten him. He figured the Rama priests had spooked the place up some to scare off trespassers. This was a large vault. Taking out his flashlight, he clicked it on. The beam fell straight on Randal's coffin, which was open, and the sight brought both fright and relief. He wouldn't have to worry about lifting the heavy lid, but why was it open?

He moved the beam along the coffin to its end, where it fell on an ebony statue of a jackal. The beast stood guardian-like amid the dust. It was a sight that would scare the pants off most people, but Glen knew it was Anubis, the jackal idol. He'd seen it before.

Not wanting to waste precious time, he approached the coffin, keeping his senses alert for signs of illness or strength. Moonlight glowed on the lid and lining, so he clicked off his flashlight and checked the skylight. Cobwebs covered the glass. Looking back at the coffin, he saw that Randal was inside, looking like a rosy-cheeked sleeping angel.

In a flash, Glen had his hunting knife and a cloth sack out. The idea of cutting Randal's head off didn't particularly appeal to him, but since there'd be no blood, it didn't bother him either.

Reaching down, he touched Randal's cheek, and as he touched it, a sticky blob fell from the ceiling and stuck to the back of his hand. Repulsed, he tried to shake it off, but it stayed glued there. He looked at it more closely; it was like a gory blob of crushed flies, with spider legs moving within it. His stomach turned, but he managed to remain calm. Using the sharp tip of the hunting knife, he tried to shave the blob off, but it merely oozed under the blade and continued wriggling.

Wind sighed outside the tomb, and suddenly, there was whispering everywhere; crazy whispering like he was in some medieval madhouse. Another blob of the spidery crap fell beside him, and he jumped back, then it was like the shadows were turning to bloody goo and raining down on him. The hunting knife clattered on the floor, and he let out a startled cry. Some of the crawly goo almost got in his mouth, so he clenched his teeth, afraid to scream as he fell to his knees and crawled toward the only door leading out of the poison storm of insect gore.

By the time he reached the flagstones at the tomb mouth, gore caked his back. He felt like he was crawling up out of a mud pit; there was no pain, but that did nothing to hold back the tide of terror flooding in to drown his sanity. Every moment, he expected the pain to begin.

Glen blinked, trying to bring the graveyard into focus. He saw flames licking up from the many sculptured stones. The carved faces ballooned to distortion in the fire. Demonic faces melting with bizarre expressions. Faces lost in the evil that endlessly consumed them.

A being in black robes appeared and was gliding through the stones with arms and legs flying in impossible ways under the cloth. It was like a puppet put in motion by someone tearing at the strings. The figure passed the tomb, cutting a blurred tunnel in the flames, and then another black-robed ghost appeared. This second one dancing slowly and shaking a rattle crowned by a shrunken head.

An inhuman scream lifted from the tomb, hitting Glen like a scorching wind. He held up his blackened hands, terror shivered through him like electricity; he gave them a violent shake and two rotten fingers fell off, spattering into blood and gore flowers on the flagstones. The rest of his fingers began to pulse, and the goo slid off, leaving him with limp, blistered sacks of blood attached to his hands.

Shock rose and created a firewall between him and terror, and he began to weep, making occasional hysterical cries, all the time staying on his knees. His vision became amphetamine-sharp, and he watched as his hands rotted off completely; his skin flaking away like leper snow, uncovering blood-blistered flesh and gangrenous decay.

Nihil returned, a black figure running crookedly through the stones. Glen's arms were reduced to stumps; his feet and legs were now as soft as rotten wood, but still hanging on. Shock gave way to howling in his head, the agony causing him to stand up and stumble off through the tombstones, his decaying body spilling bright blood and falling to gruesome black-pus-green and red tatters as he ran. Bones disconnected, and piece by piece, he came apart until he collapsed, and his head broke free. It rolled among the stones, his dry brains rattling as the skull came to rest.

A hot wind was blowing in from Texas, shaking through the maples like dragon's breath as it knocked up the mercury. Chuck Tyson's drink was piss warm, so he let it fly out the window and watched the foam spray across the sunset potentilla bushes. It was getting too damn hot to sit in a cruiser with a shitty air conditioner. Feeling cooked, he got out, slammed the door, and strolled across the lot. His pants were stuck to his butt, so he brushed them loose. "Damn fools gave me a case of stakeout ass," he thought as he remembered the procession of cars he'd turned away earlier. Chuck saw them all as people fascinated by the idea of supernatural power. Yet none of them would know how to use it. He believed in using power; you used it to get to the top, not to play mystic. The Chief had taught him that.

Power was one of the reasons Chief Elroy wanted this whole deal put to rest. The way the Chief saw it, the Rama church was a genuine religious outfit. They were not Scientologists, but legitimate do-gooders who put money into the city. And Melanie had already mentioned that she'd be spending big bucks in

Toronto. Of course, the Chief wished the Rama church were a tad more conservative. Supernatural stuff was a darn headache. He had a hard time making it all look straight.

Chuck Tyson and several other officers were considered top-cop material, and Chuck was top-cop enough to know that most of the other grunts would never make it up the ladder. They were heroes, imagining themselves as the white hats against the black hats, while Chief Elroy knew that crime existed in statistics. Heroics were other statistics that could be created with publicity. Publicity was important, used to shape the force's image. It was also used by the Chief to give Melanie's church a more positive image. A long time ago, the Chief had concluded that Toronto itself was something you created and presented to the people in a certain way, through proper use of publicity.

Chuck rolled his tongue, spat in the dust, and kicked gravel over it. The trees beneath the overpass were riffing with the wind. He tried to remember when he stopped being a hero. It hadn't been an all-at-once thing. More like a long, slow transformation. After about ten years on the force, Chuck knew that he wasn't putting the bad guys out. His job was to size up the case on a computer file and go hard for a conviction if one looked possible. It had little to do with guilt or innocence. One morning, while chuckling with his partner about the creep he'd just put away, it hit him that he knew a few facts he hadn't revealed. It certainly wasn't his job to prove anybody innocent, but even so, his coffee tasted sickly sweet, and he thought he could feel a hero dying - sort of kicking in his guts. The feeling was a rotten one, like when he was a rookie and woke up with his first ugly whore. Nothing really wrong had been done, but he still had to roll her face away and wonder how he could do such a thing to his wife.

Chuck continued his musing and kicked a clod of earth over the embankment. As the dirt exploded in the weeds, chanting reached his ears. He stood still for half a minute, thinking it to be the wind humming in the overpass. It sounded like a blending of faraway voices.

He decided he had better check the valley and walked along the embankment to a wide path curving down to the graveyard. The stones marking the path were painted luminous white; they resembled two strings of bones, running down a small road of interlocking stones that wound up past the big tomb.

Movement in the shadows caught his eye. Something else was near the tomb. He squinted. Enigmatic voices were rising in volume, coming in layered snatches of sound. A man was kneeling in the faint electric light at the mouth of the tomb, praying or maybe chanting to a black-robed priest before him.

Chuck's temper flared, and combined with the humid heat, it became murderous. Occult creeps had gotten by him and opened the tomb. He suddenly realized that Glen Connors hadn't been among the people he'd turned away. Connors' vulpine face painted itself onto the kneeling man.

"Connors, you son of a bitch!" Chuck said through clenched teeth, then his fists tightened, and he began to stride down the path.

A startling scream, theatrically spine-tingling, rushed up from the tomb. Chuck stepped off the path to get a clear view. The priest was gone. A huge, inky birdlike thing flew between the stones and statues. As he watched, it became more like a berserk kite. He halted, certain the heat was causing

hallucinations. The darkness melted and swirled, with a shifting intensity of color that patterned a flow of warped Pandora faces. He could now see that the voices were coming from the roiling mass of faces and were an expression of their morbid emotions.

Chuck moved ahead slowly, reaching the road. The man by the tomb was weeping hysterically; his clothing a mass of rot, and his hands and face black, red, and gangrenous. It wasn't Glen Connors. It wasn't anybody except maybe a half-gone corpse crawled out of the grave.

The corpse-like man was holding his hands out, begging for mercy. Pieces of rot fell from him, and he stood up suddenly, shaking all over, and stumbled into the tombstones, leaving a gruesome trail of moldering body parts behind him. When he was nearly a skeleton, he disappeared from view, and the kite thing that Chuck had thought was a dancing priest skated down the trail of remains. In the distant shadows, the kite looked like a bat flying helter-skelter. The melting darkness turned to flat mud, burying the faces, and except for the wind, there was silence.

Silence and an open tomb. Chuck was so thoroughly spooked he felt sober. He'd seen all kinds of weird occult and religious rituals, and he knew that small, unexplainable events could happen, but he couldn't bring himself to believe in this freak happening. Ghosts, maybe evil spirits, only they could play tricks that ugly on people.

Hot wind ruffled his shirt; he could feel its lifting power helping him move forward to the flagstone apron out front of the tomb. He stopped at the small heap of skin and black stuff that remained where the man had been kneeling. He didn't want to touch it, but morbid interest got the better of him, and his hand went to it. It oozed between his thumb and forefinger like wet tobacco or soft hashish, then crumbled away to black sand. He'd never encountered a substance like it. Thinking it might possess strange powers, he tore a page from his pocket notebook, folded a pinch of the grue dust in it, and put it in his wallet.

Turning to the tomb door, he saw that the locks and latches had been torn right out of the wood. He couldn't figure out how someone could have done such a brutal job without him hearing it.

Taking a deep breath, he steadied his nerves and prepared to enter. Sweat trickled between his shoulder blades, and his scrotum shrank up tight as a walnut. He wished he had a beer he could guzzle.

Something moved in the shadows just inside the door. Chuck froze halfway through a step. A head emerged - a dog, the biggest dog he'd ever seen. It fixed clever eyes on him, then ducked back inside. "Some kind of jackal," Chuck thought, and since it was twice the size of a normal jackal, he hoped it wasn't hungry.

Heat rushes dizzying him, he began to walk backward, clutching his gun. His eyes stayed glued to the tomb as he made his way through the tombstones. The statue of an ancient sun god was the largest object around, so he hid behind it.

The jackal poked its head out again. Chuck peeked from behind the statue; the shield on the kneeling sun god's back provided excellent cover, but Chuck still

trembled. He knew the creature went by scent, not sight, and once he'd seen the corpse of a woman who'd been ripped apart by pit bulls. Pit bulls were mice compared to this beast. A deep growl echoed from the tomb, and his bowels nearly gave way. It scared him so much he couldn't move or even choke.

Hind end first, the sleek jackal emerged from the tomb. It was walking backward, dragging something. Snow-white robes came into view. The jackal had its teeth sunk into the shoulder of a corpse - Randal's corpse. Blood was flowing lightly from the wounded shoulder, staining the front of the burial robe.

Chuck wondered how it could be Randal when Randal wasn't supposed to have a drop of blood in him. Yet it looked exactly like Randal, with the same airs of sophisticated piety in its features. It was more like a sleeping or unconscious Randal, not a dead one.

When the body was across the flagstones, the jackal released the shoulder and turned to face Chuck. Its oval eyes blazed with emerald fire. Chuck ducked back behind the sun god and hoped the jackal would lose interest. He doubted bullets would be effective against such a powerful creature or that he could even hit it when his hands were shaking so much.

Thirty hair-raising seconds passed before Chuck heard the jackal resume work on the corpse, dragging it away. After another minute, he looked and saw the dog disappearing among the stones with the body.

Seeing no other beasts around, Chuck turned and fled from the tomb. He didn't stop running until he was in the parking lot, and there he stumbled against his cruiser, falling across the hood. His head spun like a circus ride, his strength was sapped, and his lungs were raw and burning. He knew he'd caused most of the misery by running off in a panic and letting his lungs get ripped raw by gasping. He didn't feel like a hero at all now, and deep inside, he knew he would never do anything brave again. Part of him had left with the jackal, and he only wanted to be a coward - safe, drunk, and on the easy shift until retirement.

Paws of wind rattled the sliding doors; Dan stepped out on the patio and studied the change in the weather. It was like stepping into a steamy rain forest. He glanced up at the blurred stars, hoping that the humidity would work to keep people away from the cemetery and Randal's tomb.

Loops of crystal dangled from Dan's fisted right hand and rattled as he stepped back inside and went to the living room. Len was up and sitting in a large wing chair; he wore casual clothes - light brown slacks and a green T-shirt. An unnatural intensity of thought marked his face.

Jennifer rose from the couch and closed a collection of ghost stories she'd been reading. Her red gown was stimulating, though unnecessarily formal. "It looks like nothing more than a pile of crystals. Are you sure it has powers?"

"Dad thinks everything has powers," Sheila said from the other end of the couch.

Dan fastened a string of the largest crystals around his neck and shook the rest of them in place. They formed a wide oval that hung below his solar plexus. "This necklace was given to me by a man who lives in the Holy Lands. Thomas Cran is his name. At the time, I was writing a series of articles on

talismans that could ward off evil. Cran was the most saintly of the occult people I met. He said he helped design this talisman for a Palestinian archaeologist working in Egypt. Supposedly, it worked to protect him from a curse that killed a number of other people. At least he lived to return. Cran gave it to me, saying he no longer needed it."

"I don't see how a few strings of crystal could ward off evil?" Sheila said.

"I'll show you how it works," Dan said. He reached behind his neck and fumbled with the clasp. The crystals began to glow brightly, and some dark patches formed the outline of a face, partly in profile. It was the face of a rugged, bearded man with crooked lips, a long, wide nose, extremely thick eyebrows, and huge sockets.

"It's not a face I recognize," Len said.

"No one knows whose face it is," Dan said. "Thomas Cran said some remains and a shroud were uncovered in the Holy Lands fifty years ago. At first, it was said that the remains were those of a prophet from Isaiah's period, but the church rejected that hypothesis."

"I see," Len said. "The face is a likeness developed from the image on the shroud. Evil beings must know who the face belongs to."

"Yes, evil beings know who it is and find the face unbearable to look at."

"You would think the church would recognize it as a saint," Jennifer said.

"In the case of the pope and his ecumenical council, they move so slowly that there is justification to the argument that they are antiquated to the point of being an ancient evil."

"Placing too much stock in holy relics is itself a form of evil, and Randal was like the pope in making too many things holy," Len said, his eyes reflecting the glitter of the crystal. An intense frown darkened his sockets. He picked up a long silver spike he had with him. "This is the sort of relic I have confidence in," he said.

"It's past midnight," Dan said. "We'd better get going." He brushed back a wave of hair that had fallen in his face and stared uncertainly at the window. "Sheila, maybe you should stay up tonight. Use my pepper gun or sword to scare off any intruders."

"I feel a constant tingling," Jennifer said. "It might not be the best night to move on the tomb."

"We'll have to chance it," Len said. "Otherwise, we might not get to the body on time."

"Don't answer the door for anyone," Dan said. "There's a possibility that Len and I will be arrested. If we aren't back by morning, contact my lawyer."

Sheila felt like she was doing unneeded baby-sitting. She gave Jennifer an unhappy glance. "Don't take any chances, Dad. If the coast isn't clear, wait for another night."

"Okay, Len," Dan said. "Bring your spike, but keep it out of sight."

A minute later, Sheila stood on the front steps with her hands on her hips, looking across the wildflower garden at the red sports car pulling out. The

taillights left a stain in the haze as they slowly faded from view. She wondered if Len and her father really knew what they were doing. Something occult and wicked was happening, but it ran counter to her general outlook to do anything more than ignore it. It was only because her father was in it deep that she felt she had to plunge into unfamiliar territory.

It was killer hot out, no doubt about it, but she knew the truth was that if the heat bothered you, you were unhealthy. She formed a mental picture of the city's bicycle and jogging trails as she calculated how long it would take her to run to the valley cemetery. She came up with less than half an hour if she took the shortcuts. Dan and Len, prowling in the car, would likely take longer than that. If Jennifer fell asleep, it would be possible to sneak out. Hopefully, the ghost stories were making her drowsy. For most people, a few ghost stories would be a full lullaby, but Jennifer was a bookworm. She also had a weak constitution and wouldn't likely be a night owl.

Back inside, Sheila made sure the doors were double-locked, then turned to assess Jennifer's level of alertness. She was still engrossed in her book, but her eyelids looked a little heavy. Sheila studied her further, finding it hard to believe that she wasn't married. Her father had hidden her well, as Dan had said. Sheila smiled smugly; she liked the idea of a woman like Jennifer being several years older than her and unmarried. Jennifer was a woman of the pale princess type that Sheila usually hated; the type that never looks for a man, but sits in an ivory tower while the knights pitch woo from below. As a young tomboy, Sheila had identified with males, but that'd changed when womanhood arrived. Her dominant nature and uncompromising personality never allowed any relationship to last more than a couple of months. Some of her friends thought she was developing the personality of a spinster. Sheila didn't agree with that assessment. She figured a spinster to be a woman who couldn't trap a man. She could catch them easily; only the bite of the leg iron would rouse them to fury.

Jennifer used the opposite strategy with men; some big eyes, and men like Dan would fall all over the place. Try as she might, Sheila was unable to approach a man that way. Her mother, Karren, was a fashion model, and she'd taught Sheila that men were to be bullied. Sheila had learned her lessons well and knew how to pull the spine out of a big shot. As far as fashion went, she found clothes too accessible to be considered valuable. Her mother had always said that looking fabulous was easy, but Sheila thought it was simply a waste of time.

"You think they'll be long?" Jennifer said.

"There's no sense waiting up for them. You should get some sleep. Your body hasn't adjusted to the new surroundings. The place is locked up tighter than a drum, and I put the alarm on. We couldn't be snugger."

"I would definitely feel better if we had protection."

Sheila opened the bottom drawer of the coffee table and took out a blue gun. It was plastic with metallic flecks and had a wide nozzle. "We have a gun. A pepper-gas gun. It's illegal, of course, but it works. Puts down everything from rapists to pit bulls. I'll leave it here on the table so you'll know where it is. I can grab Dan's sword if I need a weapon."

"Have you ever used the gas gun?" Jennifer said, putting down her book and reclining.

"Sure, sometimes I meet guys when I'm jogging and gas them just for fun."

"You don't really do that?" Jennifer said through a giggle.

"No, not really," Sheila said, figuring Jennifer to be a dope and never out of the house much. In actual fact, a couple of men had made the mistake of following Sheila while she was jogging the trails and in possession of the gas gun.

"Dad's done a lot of risky things," Jennifer said. "This time I think we should've stayed out of it."

"How long have you guys been doing this?"

"Ten years for me, but I used to mainly coordinate things from home. Thirty years for my father and his friends. It started back in Ecuador for him. The Cutucu rain forest. He encountered an Indian with strange powers."

Sheila put her bare feet up on the table. "Most people think supernatural evil is all superstition. How do you explain how evil comes about?"

Jennifer studied Sheila's doubting face and knew she would be a hard person to convince of anything. Sheila would be a hard person for anyone to get close to as well. "It's hard to say what will become supernatural. Evil can be a price we pay for love. There is jealousy, passion, the cruelty of the unloved, or love turned to perversion like a corrupt priest's sexual love for a child. The worst evil seems to burst out of a coldness of heart. A man who loves a political or business system more than he does people might exterminate millions, or a holy man in isolation may find emptiness of heart instead of salvation. Evil can spring out of madness and delusions. Pride and arrogance are really delusions, and the lust for personal power is a false need. I suppose you really want to know where evil beings come into this. How they appear on earth. And that's the supernatural part. Evil beings only come through people who are open to them, and you obviously have to believe in a spirit realm to believe in them. People who lust for supernatural power conjure up evil beings. The symbolic doorway has always been the heart; that's why a stake is driven through the heart, home of passion and pride. Books of spells and relics aren't enough to conjure up evil beings. It is vital that the conjurer be thoroughly wicked."

From the expressway, they could see the winking lights of many buildings and downtown's skyline of skyscrapers squatting in the heavy haze. It was almost like a super big ocean liner had run aground and was firing its beacons through the fog. To their right was one of the many ravines that ran to the valley cemetery. The ravine was steeped in a much lighter haze and sepia darkness. Dan followed a long bend leading into the valley overpass. He planned to cruise past the parking lot for a look-see before entering the cemetery from a less obvious point. Len was silent, shadows and swathes of light skated over his face, and his heavily lined features gathered darkness, revealing the shape of his skull in grim-reaper fashion.

"I hope you're up to hiking in the heat?" Dan said.

"I'm not worried about the hiking, I'm worried about the curse," Len said, his voice gathering unplanned-for drama from his grim mood. "Tombs are natural homes for elementals."

"What are elementals?"

"To enforce a curse, a spirit condenses out of smoke or mist and takes a form named by the conjurers. The form is called the elemental. It might be a poisonous snake, a monster, anything deadly."

"I have my talisman."

"Talismans have been known to fail, so be careful."

As they reached the overpass, Dan moved into the passing lane and picked up speed. The treads hissed with smooth precision on the hot, sticky asphalt, and then a moment of reckoning arrived in Dan's mind with an image of a police cruiser, lights off, racing for him head-on on the wrong side of the road. The man behind the wheel had a frozen face - pained, with his mouth open to make a black gash. A face that fit with the death it was bringing, or would've brought if Dan hadn't angled across the empty lanes. Fishtailing, Dan brought the car under control as the cruiser sped by.

Dan looked at Len, and Len looked at Dan, but neither said anything. They had swallowed up the overpass and could see that no one was in the cemetery parking lot. Dan slowed and turned in, parking in the shadows under a wavelike overhang of wisteria.

"That was Chuck Tyson," Dan said as he turned off the lights and engine. "If I didn't know better, I'd say he's an agent of the curse."

"He looked like he was scared to the point of being in shock."

Dan nodded. "Let's go down and see if we can find what freaked him out."

Len and Dan both had sharp eyes, but Dan's were darker, which is likely why he picked up on the powers of darkness quicker. The wind had kicked up a light screen of dust in the lot, and he saw through it to the open tomb below. A moment later, Len spotted something, too. It startled them, but they remained silent as they hurried down the path. Len's stake gleamed, and Dan's talisman rattled as they ran. They saw no one, and in no time, the exertion slicked their faces with sweat. A sinking feeling hit them, running as deep as their fears; a look in the tomb would confirm it - they'd come too late, and the body was gone. Now they wouldn't know whether Randal had been resurrected or relocated.

Dan's sandals clattered on the flagstones. He glanced around. "Did you see something moving over there in the stones?"

"Nothing, just shadows," Len said. He bent down and scooped up some of the black dust blowing on the flagstones. "It appears to be some sort of rot that has blown out of the tomb."

"Let's go in," Dan said.

They halted for a moment under the lintel, and Len shook his head as Dan checked the splintered door. One step into the darkness of the tomb, and they could feel the dust. A cloud of it was floating in faint light over the open coffin. Dan flicked on a flashlight, and they moved up quickly. The coffin was empty, and fresh blood smeared the side. Dan followed the blood with his flashlight beam. On the floor, it was blackened and made almost invisible by dust.

The trail of blood led them back out of the tomb to the edge of the flagstones. It was getting hazier in the graveyard, and the shadowy statues and stone heads looked almost alive. They were unable to pick up any more of the trail in the grass, so they turned back to the tomb.

"Let's go back in for a better look," Dan said. "Later, we'll take a walk through the graveyard and see if we can pick up the trail."

Knowing time was short, they hurried back in and began searching the tomb. The beam of the flashlight skated across the wall and stopped on a horned mask; beside it was a trident. Both were items used in ritual magic.

Stepping up close, Len read the inscription on the trident's handle. "Yod-He-Vau-He," he intoned.

In answer, the black dust swirled and thickened.

"The dust is sticking to me," Dan said.

"Try using your talisman."

Reaching behind his neck, Dan hit the tiny switch in the clasp. At first nothing happened, then a moment later a long-winded moan filled the tomb. It was followed by a flood of angry whispering that rose and died in a rattle. The talisman glittered and glowed, and the holy face appeared on the wall. Instantly, the trident turned to rust and fell, clattering to the floor. As the talisman grew brighter, the black dust ceased its swirling, came unglued from their skin, and vanished.

"The dust was the elemental," Len said. "We're lucky we weren't killed."

A huge mural painted on the stone wall behind the coffin caught their attention.

"There's a story in it," Len said. "We have the symbol of Rama. The skull with the ruby eyes is a demon. The lotus flower he's approaching represents the sun and the living. The scepter means a king reigns, and the swirls of cornflower blue represent the sky of eternity. This mural tells what the spirit of Rama is - it is a spirit sent by a demon king to prepare the way for his reign. Once here, the demon king plans to rule the planet for eternity."

"Do you mean this demon thinks it's powerful enough to destroy the world as we know it?"

"Yes," Len said, though he could scarcely believe it. "The Church of the Seven Ethers is the vehicle the demon has chosen to work through. With the church, it can establish itself on earth. My guess is that people across the world will become possessed. Melanie is the demon's agent now. She is channeling its power."

Dan felt lightheaded. "I knew we'd find something evil, but I didn't expect something this big. We need to consult an expert. Someone who'd know a way to stop the rise of this demon."

A rumble shook the floor of the tomb, and the coffin lid banged shut behind them. It was as though Tukoraka, father of demons, had heard and was answering from the bowels of the earth. Fine plaster dust sifted through the musty air, and the rumble became a boom, the footsteps of a giant.

"We'd better get out before the roof comes down!" Len said.

Dan didn't believe the tomb would collapse, but he didn't want to take a chance on being trapped in it. He glanced at the ceiling and followed Len to the door. Out on the flagstones, they met the source of the sound. The huge statue of the sun god was walking in the graveyard, its heavy feet pounding the ground with unnatural force.

The stone god turned, its weight making for smooth momentum. It pulled the heavy shield from its back and removed a long silver knife from its scabbard.

Len and Dan took a couple of steps back, trying to figure out how to deal with this ancient warrior. The sun god was too big to fight and too big to run from.

Dan snatched Len's spike as the stone warrior continued its thundering approach. "Get back," he said to Len, the awesome sight of the sun god turning his voice to a near whisper. "If I can't stop him, try to slip away in the graveyard."

Len ducked back, and Dan raised the spike, ready to drive it into the stone giant. As the warrior closed in, faint yellow light from Dan's talisman touched it. The effect was instant; the shield turned to rotten, tick-covered wood and rusted metal bands. Lichens and corrosion made a mass of decay on its body, and its hair became a heap of withered vines. Hatchet-blade scars appeared on its face, and by the time it was in striking range, roots and clods of dirt hung from its cracked feet. The blade grew dull, warped, and gained a patina.

The sun warrior struck out with a chipped arm that still carried incredible strength. Dan easily had the speed to dodge the blow, but instead, he used the spike as a bar to block the blow. The blade shattered, and a piece of the rusted metal flashed down, cutting Dan's leg just above the knee. Ducking back quickly, he glanced at the blood trickling on his leg. He snapped his hand down on the spike and used it as a club, launching a heavy blow into the shield. It cracked apart like rotten shingles, but the sun god moved in defense and managed to glance a broken hand off Dan's right shoulder. The blow carried him to the flagstones, but he managed to hold onto the spike.

The stone warrior was raising a root-covered foot to stomp him, so he rolled out of the way, sprang up, and moved in, driving the spike hard into the statue's breast. It sank into the stone as if it were a bed of mold and rot. Then, as he twisted it, the statue's arms closed around him to crush him. He managed to squirm low, throw himself down, and skitter away on his butt, feet, and hands.

The sun warrior roared, and the sound was like ten madmen howling from the bottom of a deep cavern. Dan shuddered, wondering how many demons had possessed the warrior statue. Scrambling to his feet, he moved out of the way as the giant thundered about, cracking the flagstones.

Demons bellowed angrily through lungs the god didn't have, and it sounded like the statue was filled with the fury of a devil that refused to resign itself to defeat and death. Clumsily, the statue stomped up the stones at the front of the tomb, and then it stumbled inside. It roared again and slammed the tomb walls with its forearms, the thunder of its blows shaking the whole structure until the blocks split and came crashing down.

Once in motion, it all crumbled fast, and seconds later, the graveyard was mournfully silent. Dust smoked out of what was left of the tomb mouth, and

the hot wind spun it away in curling trails. Dan couldn't help getting the feeling that a sepulchral dragon had been fed.

"Get down!" Len yelled from where he was hiding, beside an obelisk. "Something is coming through the stones! Over that way!"

Dan spun from the tomb mouth and crouched. He could see a black sheet blowing, flapping, and tumbling across the graveyard. A skeptic would mistake it for a magician's trick ghost, but Dan knew it was something deadly. It passed the tomb, whirled, turned like a wheel, and headed back in the direction from which it came. A black bat-like object had separated from it as it turned, and now it was changing direction to head straight for Dan.

Dan jumped to one side, but the projectile altered its course and kept zooming toward him. Steadying himself, he caught the projectile, only to find that catching it wasn't enough - it stung his hands, buzzed angrily, and tried to propel itself up to his throat. He staggered back, pumping his arms. He swung the angry mite in circles as he wrestled with it. The glow from the talisman aided him, working slowly to exterminate it. When it finally fell limp, Dan saw it clearly. It was a shrunken head, yellow feathers were in its mangy locks of dark hair, pearly chips were its eyes, and it had a silver nose ring and a gaping mouth full of pointed ivory teeth.

Powers of the talisman continued to work, turning the head into a crumbling lump of sand. Dan crushed it in his hand and looked on with satisfaction as the moldered chunks dropped onto the flagstones.

Len stepped out from behind a tombstone and hurried up to Dan. They both stared at the crumbled head, seeing maggots crawling in the shrinking wisps of hair. Fearing more supernatural attacks, they looked around the graveyard; the darkness was liquid, and amorphous phantoms drifted at the limits of their vision, but they saw nothing substantial enough to alarm them.

"Let's get out of here," Len said. "I have another way of tracking Randal's corpse, that's if we decide the corpse has priority anymore. In light of our new knowledge, we'd better review everything."

CHAPTER SEVEN: NIGHT RUNNERS

Television acted as a tranquilizer, floating Jennifer off to dreamland. The idiot box usually put Sheila to sleep, but tonight her nerves kept her alert. Gently, she lifted Jennifer's legs onto the couch and adjusted her pillow. Her hands looked out of place, so she folded them across her tummy, gazing for a moment at her perfect peach fingernails. It was time to go, so she crossed the room, snatched up her pack, and tiptoed to the patio. She exited silently, as any sound could disturb the Twinkies raining in Jennifer's dreams.

A river of haze ran at the bottom of the ravine. Sheila leaped over a low hedge at the back of the patio and plunged into the misty darkness of the ravine, running and leaping down the steep, treacherous path. Any other person would've wiped out and busted a leg, but she knew every step from her daily run. At the bottom, she let her momentum carry her across a field of Canada bluegrass to the asphalt path. Sweat began to flow, but lightly because she was dressed for the weather in navy shorts and a halter-top. She wouldn't

have perspired at all, but the steamy humidity was condensing on her skin, bringing up the sweat.

Sounds of chattering crickets, night birds, frogs, a splashing stream, curtains of leaves rushing in the breeze, and the blanket of haze worked to isolate the ravine from the city. Thoughts that belonged in a child's nightmares began to surge in her mind, hampering her perception and painting the night with ghoulish shapes. She began to dodge men and rabid animals she imagined to be lurking in every arbor of deep shadows along the trail. Perhaps a hidden psychopath would spot her, or the wooden bridge ahead would collapse. When she blinked, she saw bodies strung in the willows on the stream bank, and while passing under a rail trestle, she was afraid someone making a suicide jump would thump down on her.

She recalled Jennifer's warning about evil spirits in the city, and figured it was the evil spirit of Rama in the air. It was everywhere, especially in the ravine, and it knew how to seep into her thoughts and plant ugly images.

Lights from a freeway overpass created haze halos, killing some of the fear and making the darkness less of a big spook. She moved on, following a stream bank to a wide runoff tunnel. The tunnel was a vital shortcut; she couldn't hope to reach the valley in time to meet Dan and Len without it. Getting through it would be easy, as summer heat always dried the runoff flow to a trickle.

Granite stones and concrete chunks reinforced the bank. A hop got her down to the stony stream bed. Brown water trickled in the tunnel mouth. She spotted a hobo roost partway down the huge concrete tube. Two men sat by a tiny fire. The breeze acted to suck the smoke out the other end.

Old terrors came to life in Sheila's mind. In reality, the homeless men hadn't noticed her, but in another tunnel - a dark, traumatic one from her past - they were staring. She saw the same dirty men who'd grabbed her when she was ten years old. They wore ill-fitting, filthy clothes, long shadows stretched their faces to leers, and their tobacco-stained hands itched with the desire to molest little girls. She could smell charred meat and cheap sherry. Her flesh crawled at the thought of their touch. Standing at the tunnel mouth, she put her back up like a cat, unable to decide what to do.

Shifting her pack, she removed her hunting knife from its leather case. She studied the fine marbling on the handle and felt the blade's solid heft as she made a short thrust. One silver flash, quick as a bullet, would kill a creep. Her eyes widened, turning feral red with firelight. In a daydream, she stabbed the molesters repeatedly, cutting open chests filled with damp, rotted newspaper.

She shook her head, then clutched her curls with her left hand. What was she thinking? It would be murder, and these were only homeless men. They'd be easy to pass. Most likely, they were too drunk to even get up.

Keeping the hilt of her knife poking from her pack, she began to creep down the tunnel. It was large enough for her to stand upright. Firelight added streaks of red to the trickle of muddy water, and the darkness flowed, making shadows and big gestures on the tunnel walls. Shadows resembling columns of gangly, malformed men marched up and around her, surrounding her and sweeping their shadow arms over her while laughing through huge, gaping mouths.

The hot wind rose and fell in the tube, and she was sure it was the rank, lusty breath of the shadow men, their vomit-misted exhalations, filtered by rotten teeth. It was all she could do to keep from slashing at the shadows.

A shameful memory came unbidden into her mind. She was eleven years old again and sitting on Tommy Hayes' chest, her long red curls falling over a cut she'd scratched in his neck with a shard of glass. She was crying because she had to kill Tommy to keep him from growing up and becoming one of the filthy men. Tears blinded her, so she rolled off, and he ran away screaming for his mother. It happened to all the little boys; they got bigger, developing awkward limbs, long hair, and noses and faces scabbed with pimples. Some of them had blotches of freckles so big their faces were like Pepsi-colored tramp skin. They turned into dirty men. A terrible fate, worse than death, had got them. It was poison in their blood.

Her memory was playing tricks on her; she crept up to the garbage strewn near the fire without showing proper caution. One guy was unconscious, but the other was awake and chewing on a piece of roasted meat. Shifting shadows obscured his face. A pile of empty sherry bottles rested beside him. His pants were stained and grimy. Getting by him wouldn't be difficult; she'd just say hello, step over his buddy, and dash to the end of the tunnel.

Thicker smoke near the fire killed some of the stench, but it didn't deodorize it enough to calm her stomach. She gulped, readying herself to choke out a greeting. The man heard her and turned his face; it was scabrous, his eyes were pale yellow, his hands were over his mouth, and a thin tail was sticking out between his greasy fingers. It was a roasted rat he was eating. Sheila shook and nearly vomited, forcing it back as she stepped over his unconscious buddy. Her bare leg caught the firelight, and he dropped the chewed rat and groped at her calf with a greasy hand.

Sheila's head whirled with revulsion; she fell on one knee and threw up on a small heap of trash. Her bowels almost gave way, preventing her from rising. She saw a hand reaching for her again so she sprang up and fled, stubbing her toes on stones. She moved quickly and got out of the tunnel.

Long fingers of smoke trailed from the tunnel mouth, and as her heart and breathing settled, she pulled an old T-shirt from her pack. She wiped her knees and calf, finding the grease to be like bloody tallow that wouldn't come off easily. Using some of the polluted stream water, she got it to melt.

Grimacing with disgust, she threw the shirt into the tunnel and climbed the bank. The path was dry, cracked earth; she was in coffee-darkness, and the stars were spangles in a veil of haze. It was a ravine that ran off the cemetery valley like a small wrinkle off a lifeline.

She resumed jogging, undulating walls of grass and weeds ran beside the path, and thistles choked it in places. High up on the ravine side, maple branches snapped and hummed in the wind like ragged flags. Sheila checked the time on her pocket computer and knew she'd left too late to arrive with Len and Dan. Dan wasn't answering calls, so she hoped they'd been delayed and were still lingering at the graveyard.

The ravine side spilled out into the valley, and the walls of weeds and the path faded. A long meadow spread before her, and she could see the lavenders, whites, and yellows of wild flowers sprinkled in the dry grass. Seed fluff was

blowing. She was near a trestle and had a view through the arch made by two of its massive supports. It was like looking into a telescope; the valley spread out from the arch, bathed in faint light in the distance.

Vines trailed through the meadow grass, and they worked with thistles and stones to make running impossible. Sheila paced through the grass, watching for snags. Gaps in the dark valley panorama kept forming a long, hideous face. She had to keep blinking to break it up, and by the time she reached the cemetery's end, she was grinding her teeth at the frustrating hallucinations of the Rama night.

Here at the back of the valley, neglected stones ran like lines of broken teeth. Sheila moved past weeds as tall as sentinels. On one corroded stone, she saw a date - 1820 framed by moss-filled cracks and lichens.

Looking ahead, she saw mixed shadows in a gate-like arch. Crouching behind a wide stone, she watched for movement. Two people became visible. They were dressed in hooded black robes, had shining black faces, and were walking slowly like zombies. They entered the overgrown, abandoned portion of the graveyard and moved south of Sheila toward a steep portion of the valley's side.

Hot wind shook the weed tops and blew their garments tight to their flesh. Sheila saw female curves and a muscular male body. A muffled ululation came from the spot they were headed for, and a dog bayed as if in answer.

The dog came into view, trailing the two hooded figures. It was monster-sized and walking backward, dragging something large and white.

Sheila was certain this wasn't another hallucination; something real had coalesced out of the shadows. She remained absolutely still, barely breathing, comforted by the fact that the wind was blowing her way. Escaping such a canine would be impossible. It was big enough to leap halfway up a tree. Closing her eyes for a moment, she feared that Dan and Len might have encountered this ghoulish shift.

A harsh, grating sound carried on the wind, and the figures, the dog, and the white object it was dragging disappeared into a black patch of valley side. Sheila waited for several minutes, knowing she couldn't take a chance on the dog reappearing. When she was sure they were gone, she rose.

Something cold and slimy had wrapped itself around her ankle, and she realized that her leg was asleep and numb. Keeping a grip on the top of a gravestone, she looked down. She gasped as she saw that a moon-pale hand had burst out of the loam and had a tight grip on her ankle.

Keeping hold of the gravestone, she jerked her leg hard. Tickles and tingles ran through it, and the hand came farther out of the grave. Wriggling fingers of another hand broke the surface; she continued jerking her leg. Earth spilled off a fat white blob, and she could see that the two hands were attached to the back of a giant white maggot.

With a hard pump of her leg, she banged the heavy maggot against the gravestone. Slime ran where the maggot smacked the stone. Accidentally, Sheila broke the cracked cross off the top of the gravestone. Leaning over, she beat at the maggot with it. Smoke hissed; the cross touched it like something

red hot, shriveling the hand away. After a few furious hits, the last of it went up in foul smoke.

She crawled away from the stone, smacking her tingling leg. Circulation returned, and a white print left by the hand slowly flushed over. The cracked cross was still in her hand; she studied it for a moment - it had been a useful tool, but it was too heavy to carry, so she threw it down.

Watching her step, she headed for the spot where the hooded figures and the dog had disappeared. Mist and moonlight created white patches of ground, and she avoided them, fearing maggots. Everything appeared touched by decay. The wind was hot and fetid. Dry, scarecrow-big weeds blew out from behind tall stones. Seed fluff flew like sticky floaters come loose from the cobweb sky. Visions of rotted coffins and musty bones were in the back of her mind.

A sandstone wall came into view. A runoff tunnel, this one sealed by a rusty grate, ran into harder stone beside it. It was a mossy tunnel, and no water flowed from it. Only a low ululation of wind emerged. A face appeared in the corner of her eye, startling her and causing her to jump back.

The face didn't belong to anybody living. It belonged to a terra-cotta head protruding from the sandstone beside the tunnel. The likeness had deformed ears and was of a bearded satyr. She guessed that it was a handle for opening the grate, but she didn't dare touch it, fearing what she might let out.

Keeping on a trail that led from the tunnel, Sheila headed for the main graveyard. Wine-red sumac bushes spotted the sandstone wall ahead, and a wide belt of burs and thistles stood at the end of the rows of broken stones. Past the thistles, trimmed grass opened on a slender turquoise moon-arch hung with a silver symbol of Rama.

Gusting wind tousled a willow just inside the arch, and the first carved head that came into view sent Sheila stumbling back into a stone griffin. She spun around to face the griffin, then quickly looked to the ground. Her skin crawled; it was the fear of being seized by something breaking up from a grave that haunted her most.

Hoping she wouldn't meet any more grave wanderers, she moved slowly through the stones toward the yellow glow of the lamps lighting the front acre and the tomb. All was silent except the wind. She came to a lamppost and spotted a heap of glittering black dust in the grass by a wing-shaped boxwood bush. Something fluttered in the wind: a human scalp lock hanging from the wingtip of the bush.

After the initial shock, Sheila plucked the hair from the bush and wrapped it in a handkerchief. She moved on to the flagstones by the tomb. A car engine roared up in the parking lot. Turning, she looked up and moments later saw Dan's car crossing the overpass.

Glancing back at the tomb, she saw the damaged doors and the rubble behind them. Even the flagstones were wrecked. Something spectacularly violent had happened, and she had missed it. She decided to leave the graveyard quickly, fearing both the tomb and the possibility of being arrested on the scene. With a measured pace, she followed the road and path up to the parking lot. Catching her breath under the wisteria, she calculated a safe route home.

An ugly dream captured Jennifer. It seeped in from the side of the world where rain is blood and clouds are hate, blindness, and greed. In her mostly insulated life, she'd never really understood human cruelty, mass extermination, wickedness, and all the other terrors she worked against. Len and her computer network had always been buffers between her and the forces of darkness. Now her protection was gone, her mind was open, and outer darkness poured in, blending at subconscious levels, creating a person fully aware of the horrors that spring from the blood. A new side of her personality was growing at the bottom of her mind, and it was no stranger to things like the demon spirit and its evils.

Poison mist drifted in the dream, and its every billow was a vision of Rama. In the blur of night, twisted evil warped countless faces. Melanie poured her potions on the waters, Dan held a spike high, Sheila raised a knife, and a crooked figure stepped out of swirling darkness. Somewhere, a priest screamed under the whip while a skull with blood-red eyes looked on.

The dream took an unexpected turn, and she saw a vision of blood bursting out of the ground. Red spray flew, then froze and shattered like crystal. Pain knifed through her head, and she awoke, letting out a small startled cry. Wind banged the shutter; her nerve endings were burning with a silent alarm. She could sense danger washing against the house like a flood and knew that something hideous was on the patio.

Jennifer sat up, realizing that Sheila was gone. She'd known it would happen. Sheila was the adventurous type and wouldn't sit back while Dan took all the risks. She'd noticed from the beginning that Sheila saw herself as her father's protector - a North American personality trait she'd likely picked up from her mother.

The pepper gun was on the table; Jennifer grabbed it and stood up. Danger signals rang like bells in her head, dizzying her and making it hard to function. She felt her blood rising, working to call up the panic and heroics needed for survival. Knowing that she was extra sensitive, she fought to keep her emotions in check.

Hurrying to the housemaster panel, she dimmed the lights, noticing that none of the alarms were lit up. It didn't reassure her. She walked to the patio apprehensively, and with trembling hands, she pulled aside a curtain and looked through the cloudy glass. A woven decorative swing was rocking in the wind, creating a ghostly air. Her eyes moved slowly to a wagon-wheel herb garden, then to a lounge and a Buddha statue. There were a few humanlike shadows. The first she traced to a small tree in a planter, the second to a flowering dogwood bush. The third shadow came from an urn of flowers perched on a block of stone, and the fourth from foliage hanging from a high framework. Some weeping spruce, espaliered to a side wall, cast shadows that looked like twisted tarantula legs, and she nearly ran from the doors when she spotted a three-pronged garden claw and mistook it for a hand clutching bits of bark in a planter.

A chestnut tree at the side of the house amplified the wind to a roar. She wished she could see into the ravine as her nerves were still tingling with alarm. There was some relief in the idea that danger might not be so close - momentary relief because an image suddenly bloomed in her mind. It was a

shadow framed in one of the translucent plastic panels at the south edge of the patio. The image was unmistakable, a tall figure dressed in a hooded robe.

Terror ripped across her mind, and a legion of demons hissed. She was left cold and trembling, unable to move as she watched the figure step from behind the panel. It had a man's gait; frayed ropes of hair showed at the fringes of his hood. He turned his head, and a white snake pattern painted on his face was revealed.

Merciless eyes shone, and his expression grew fierce. He strode against the wind to Dan's driftwood chair and turned it away from the conversation-pit benches so it faced the patio doors. Producing a painted pottery pipe from the folds of his robe, he sat down. From an inside pocket, he got a chunk of what appeared to be marbled blue clay and, with a skilled hand, crumbled it into the bowl of the pipe. He lit it with a wooden match that came into his fingers from nowhere and burned against the wind. But he didn't puff on it. Instead, he watched it burn. It was like incense, only the smoke was dense and blood-red.

Smoke looped, streamed, and scattered in the wind, and he rocked the pipe in his hand, sending big rings floating to his flared nostrils. Jennifer remained transfixed, staring into his cruel eyes. Her heart pained, hardening to a lump of ice. Mirrored in his eyes were visions of stony shores, cold storm-swept seas, frosty barren lands, and murky creatures moving under ice.

A vision of a dancing woman came into focus, her white robe flew, and her bare feet patterned the wet clay with scarlet symbols representing humans and animals. The ground began to bubble around her in a circle. Moss-green claws emerged, followed by bent blue pincers, then the cracked shell-heads of amphibious monsters rose; the inhuman creatures closed in, and her dance ended. She looked to a lonely sky of woven gray clouds as the creatures fell on her to feed. And as the fangs of the beasts ripped into her breasts, Jennifer saw that the face was her own.

Blood-red smoke funneled the vision away, hazy night returned, and Jennifer was staring through the doors at the hooded man. The three-pronged cultivator was in his left hand; he emptied the pipe and pocketed it, then he stood up and walked over to her. Pressing his face to the glass, he moved his tongue lasciviously.

Jennifer's face became blue with terror. She couldn't move. Stepping back from the smear he'd made on the glass, he lifted the cultivator and scratched the glass in front of her face. He grinned as he grabbed the door handle.

Dan's special alarm system caught him by surprise; gas jetted into his face, and the sound of gunfire and shouting came from hidden speakers. Dropping the cultivator, he choked, clawed at his face, and stumbled back. The demons in his head grew frenzied; he swung his arms and kicked, sending vases, flowerpots, and crystal ornaments crashing to the tiles.

A chain of ugly thoughts snapped; Jennifer's senses and self-control returned. She ran from the patio to the front window. A black sedan was parked in the driveway, and she saw movement behind its tinted windows. Turning quickly, she dashed to the kitchen, dropping the pepper gun on the way. Reaching the butcher block, she grabbed a hefty knife.

The patio doors exploded in a shower of quarter-moon slivers, and the full alarms sounded. There was nowhere to run, but the closet, and it was full of junk. By the time she turned, the intruder was in the kitchen doorway.

His eyes were bloodshot and tear-stained from the gas. No doubt, his lungs were on fire. A normal man would've been knocked unconscious. It was scary that he wasn't, but his weakened state still presented an opportunity. She charged at him, and he tried to move aside, but she managed to bury the knife in his shoulder. He dropped back, gasping, blood flowing from the wound, and she'd all but got around him when he seized her by the back of the neck.

She twisted and turned; they wrestled and fell to the carpet. The knife was still buried in his shoulder, so she grabbed it and twisted it, causing him to scream and fall momentarily limp.

Jennifer seized the moment, getting up and running for the patio. She was flying through the broken doors when a shard of glass cut deep into her heel and caused her to tumble over the tiles. Gasping, weeping, and pounding her fists, she crawled behind a rubbish Ricksha and tried to hide.

Alarms still screeched; the intruder found his way back to the patio. His face was ghoulish and twisted, his lips blue, and the knife was still in his shoulder. Like a demon bloodhound, he spotted her immediately and rushed her. She jumped up on one foot and shoved the Ricksha forward into him. Blacking out, she fell and rolled against the planter.

Groaning from pain and the miserable anger of demons, Garth dragged Jennifer around the house to the driveway and the waiting black sedan. He half-crawled into the passenger seat while the other two priests pulled Jennifer into the back.

"You want me to extract the knife?" Luther said.

"No. Not now," Garth snarled. "Let's get out of here."

The sedan's tires cut into the softened asphalt, and in moments, they were racing out of the suburban neighborhood. They didn't get away unseen; several witnesses saw the car flash by and noted that it had no plates.

"We've killed two birds with one stone," Garth said. "Wounded or not, I have a virgin to sacrifice, and we'll have taught Len and that nosy Dan Athusta a lesson."

"Too bad we didn't get Athusta's daughter," Luther said.

Garth rolled down the window and spat. "His daughter is a troublemaking little tramp. It'll make him suffer more if we leave her alive."

CHAPTER EIGHT: SKULL KING

Heat lightning flashed through the ash, casting the sky in orange tints. Tukoraka lifted his open palm and watched as a rose-colored leaf of ash drifted into it. The ash slowly turned white and crumbled at its ragged edges. Prismatic light from the gems embedded in the cliff reflected in the demon's eyes. Emotion of a peculiar sort showed through the reflections; it was like

revelation in many icy colors. He wasn't human, and he wasn't a genuine god. Tukoraka was more like what a man becomes after being lost in the jungle for millennia. Lost so long, he has retreated into his darkest wishes and no longer remembers his humanity.

Fierce beasts were Tukoraka's friends, and in any encounter with humans, he felt the rage of a lion trapped in his lair. But his roar could silence even the lion's, and calm the volcanoes with soothing thunder. He had conquered the great Janus-faced creature called nature, defeating its life and its death to rule supreme on a throne built with the bones of monsters, Pigmies, and the scalps of things born of ape and man. If he had memories, they were of slaughter; visions of an enemy decapitated, blood bursting up from the neck stump to make a red steeple of worship for the false gods of humans, or perhaps a vision of an idol he'd created and brought to life - its eyeballs, fangs, and python intestines showering black blood through the trees. An idol destroyed because its belly was full and its day was done.

Splintered light filtered through the cracks in a mind forged through cruelty; it was light from the fever that had replaced Tukoraka's ancient soul. Randal could see that this demon king had no choice in evil - his evil was as natural as hurricane winds and flowing lava, and it followed him everywhere because it was his way. Vile men had confessed their sins to Randal, and he had looked deep in their eyes at the hideous light hate and the choice of evil ignites. Evil twisted a blackened path through the hearts of men, like a maggot that entered with the taste of the forbidden fruit. And the evil of men was visible; it was there in their behavior and in their eyes. But Tukoraka didn't have the ugliness that evil humans possessed. He wasn't a creature of love, warped and brought low by wickedness. He was made of atoms of evil and, by nature, was more powerful than hideous. His shadow was deformed; it turned humans to boiling blood and cinders, and he couldn't know of men and women without desiring to crush them underfoot. His need was to rule them, to torment them, and force their obedience and worship of false gods. The demon king had no mortal rival, no human could struggle with him, and he wasn't in competition with mere bloodthirsty men. Tukoraka was rising to the sky and challenging God, saying, "I will command this earth and the beasts of it, many of which are human, and it will be my new earth and Eden. It will be a desert, wilderness, and lost island where all will bow and pray to the idols that devour them."

"There is a secret in ashes," Tukoraka said, and he turned and looked to the pall at the summit of the volcano. "Ashes are death, and ashes are the seeds of creation. Volcanoes explode, and rivers of fire pour across the world. It is only fitting that men carve out the hardened rock, make smoke and ash, and worship it.

"Oceans are the womb of the creature, and another volcano sends swimming, crawling lava to the shores, and it fills the jungles with birds, beasts, and all the precious things that creep and crawl on their bellies. But like men, all these things are in darkness if there is no light to contemplate them. I remember the people of ages past. The men and women who wrote the first words. Yes, these words were praise for my idols, and even I was tricked by them. I did not know that the word was corruption, sent into the earth by God.

"There was a time when I admired men. Then men were savages with faces blackened by the sun and the earth. Their eyes were fierce, cruel as the hunter's moon. Women were loyal to me then, and I gave them the world. I made humans my witches and shamans. There was dancing, feasting, joy, and hideous death. No one was ashamed of nakedness and flesh, and no one questioned the chant and the sacrifice. I gave them the wisdom of the savage. They knew that when all is flesh that will soon wither and crumble, there can be no evil; there can be the war dance, the rain dance, the idols, sweat, lust, and the ecstasies of my supernatural skies. Human lives can be like the flight of eagles. Let them soar, let their wings hum by precipice, then like all art, let them fall and perish, never to be again. Doom is the beauty of life, and because the song of life is sung only once for every man, death is glorious.

"Though no mortal can ever be Tukoraka, he that becomes Icarus will never be forgotten. I make the offer to you, Randal - become an Icarus among men. Fly, take the boldest flight, and be a king of men. Rule with me as my high priest on a new earth."

"Keep it in mind that I slept for three thousand years, and that it was mortals that disturbed my slumber. Their bloodletting, reveling, and outcry against God became a tumult. Now God is banished, and the gate is open again. I come again to place my throne on earth, and I will fill the lands with new idols and superstitions. Plagues will break the human league, and I will send out a curse so that not even brothers will stand together to fight me. The priesthood of science will not prevail, and I plan to leave these people impotent and like the ministers of the corrupt churches, worshipping their broken instruments as holy relics.

"I am returning to earth because I am kinder than any man. I am the savior. It is true that I sent a Messiah as a mockery of your foolish ideas of man as God, but I also bear real gifts. Take a deep breath, Randal, and know that it is freedom. The freedom of the volcano, the jungle, the idol, and the ape. Men and women are to be free to sin again. Savagery will lift their burden, and my new idols will be giants in the earth."

The force and resonance of Tukoraka's voice had hypnotic power, but the hellish body Randal wore didn't respond as his human body would have. Logic prevailed in his mind, and the thrill of Tukoraka's promised freedom failed to touch him. He looked at his hands - malformed lumps of flesh; the hands of something lower than even idols and apes. He now knew he had been too much of a modern man, and in the end he had mistakenly believed that religion would end in the 21st century.

Yet even without faith, he had inspired people, showing them miracles he couldn't see himself. In his early days, with the magic, he'd done even better. Angels were in the churchyards, and God was at his side. His eyesight was supernatural perception. It was unfortunate that the people he lifted to the supernatural only gained the vision for a while before the blindness returned. Membranes of evil always came in to cloud their sight, and when their faith got corrupted, the world took its share, and the demons took their souls.

Randal remembered enthused crowds and spiritually knocking them to their knees. His recruitment of priests and priestesses had been a glorious campaign. All of his best memories were of the early days, and they were really only yesterday.

There was the day a diversion took him to a carnival, billowing banners of dust in the sky, and in humid heat that made everyone look like they'd been ducked in the bull's-eye bucket, he channeled an evil spirit out of a straw-haired farmer's daughter. He had a healing hand then, and his fiery tongue denounced the fortunetellers, their greed and false promises.

The weak body he wore now made that seem impossible, but he knew it was real. A clear sun of memory was in his mind, and Averam was there in its beams. He came stumbling from a shabby booth painted with the moon and the stars. His hair braided, a turban on his head, and spangles in his beard. Averam went to his knees in the sprinkle of sawdust at Randal's feet, swearing he would do no more lying for the carnivals if Randal would take him as a disciple. And Randal did, telling him he would now teach under stars that were more than paint on cardboard.

Yes, a glowing day in his memory - flags of dust unfurling in the brilliance of sunset and Averam living in his only day of true spirituality.

Melanie's teasingly clever face appeared in the falling ashes. She'd been a proud little pop singer, and Randal had recruited her. Melanie had been on the verge of suicide, but she left with him when he came, and he saw that she wanted to believe in him. They went to a restaurant; there were slats of sunlight dropping through bamboo, the steam of herbal tea, and the jangling of tambourines. With eager eyes, she took his hand, and as he'd promised, his touch brought a vision. She believed, but in the end, she believed too much, and in the wrong way, becoming corrupt and allowing Tukoraka to send his messenger through her.

Another vision came into mind - a shining white building on the seedy side of Toronto. It had a large front window, trimmed in pastel green, like a friendly eye. Now the eye gazed from a place in Randal's memory. It was his old mission building, and he had first met Nigil while on his way there. It was spring, but it didn't look like much of a spring in the maze of back alleys Randal was shortcutting through; a sickly weed here and there, and the breeze freshening enough to partially hide the odors of rubbish and crankcase oil. It was an unlikely meeting between the high priest of a new order and a knife-wielding thief in an alley. Nigil was lean and hungry then as now and would've cut just about any man's throat. But he didn't jump Randal. He was taken by Randal's robe and presence.

Randal held him steady and kept his knife down with the same gaze he used to convince everyone of his new belief. "I have no money, not even a penny," Randal told him. "The spirit realm provides all."

In his heart, Nigil wasn't completely a thief; he dropped the knife, not because he wanted to use Randal or the church, but because he was awed by the concept of higher men who didn't care about money. Randal could walk down Skid Row with nothing at all and still make a rich man look like a slug stuck to a dollar. If Nigil hated the people of the world, it was because he wanted to see a new world, and his eyes were opening - and did open, at least for a while.

Randal believed in higher men, too, and it was after meeting Nigil that he went for a long walk through the ravine paths with Dan Athusta. They talked of new ideals then, when the spirit was as real in the air as the fragrance of the lilacs. Dan spoke of his success; he was making it, people couldn't call him some

type of poverty-stricken new-age oddball anymore. He told of a real rise in a new religion, growth that made it possible for him to travel the world and get paid in real dollars for his articles. Now, a figure like Randal was news in genuine spiritualist magazines and not just the old Martian-Elvis tabloids. Dan told Randal that it was time to put together a new worldwide church. People were open to it, especially at a time when the main churches of the great religions were reactionary and lacking innovation.

They were two spiritualists with new theological colors, looking at thirty, and not especially important or even known to the big powers of the world. They had decided to work for the spirit and not the gold-glittering world. Both men could see God; they believed in the love of Jesus and walked in peace like Buddha, and their afternoon stroll built the world's largest united church. The Seven Ethers distilled out of the air. It was inspiration and spiritual power, and it had more to do with enlightening men and women than with destroying the world. Randal had never believed in destruction; old worlds would always pass away. Savages, idols, and the blood of the firstborn in a cup; could the spirit of the ancient and the wild be called religion, or its high priest anything other than a headhunter?

There was the faceless evil of the times: mass starvation, disease, genocide, war, and the nuclear threat - but he'd also seen the demon's cup of blood, the horror of ancient evil. Turkazim and Garth had come from those black principalities. Turkazim with the scalp locks of men he'd sacrificed to broken idols and nameless demons. Turkazim had grown up with fear and reverence for African demons, and who could blame a man for being raised in a snake pit? Garth was much older, and he had called on Northern gods to protect him, and he'd needed them because he'd made the mistake of staying in America. He wanted to kill, and they sent him to their pointless wars and lands of terror, and he'd been lost so long they had to break his hunger for human flesh when they found him. Garth didn't see killers as loud, angry men; they were silent men moving in shadows on barely recognizable ground. The only sound they didn't hear was the agony in your dying screams, and they never gloated as they ate your flesh.

Perhaps Garth and Turkazim had eyes that wouldn't grow moist with compassion, but they had renounced their evil deeds and begged for forgiveness. They were in radiant light when their demons were cast to the deserts and the winds. If Randal had made some of the cruelest men kind, even for a day, then he believed he had done something for God, but Jesus had said something about the demons returning, and he should have mentioned that you don't notice it when they do. One day, you look up, and everyone is corrupt. You think about it for a moment, then the blindness comes, and you never think about it again.

Randal knew he had seen God, tried a little, and failed Him. They had all failed to live in the spirit, but it was his greater responsibility that brought him to this demon's hell. A spirit realm, but not a sacred one, because the plane of higher human dreams wasn't here. There was only savagery - open the world to Tukoraka and the sacred would die.

Randal knew there had never been a time when he could've resisted a lot of temptation, but now Tukoraka was angering him. He was lower than rock bottom, with only a few memories left. What right did the demon have to

tempt him, to offer to make him a high priest over fallen humanity? The keys to a temple in the sun could be his, but it was still low of Tukoraka, and an insult to principle to tempt the man fallen lowest with the prospect of ruling the rest.

Dressed in deformed limbs, Randal could choose nothing other than some moments without pain. He could only choose what Tukoraka offered. There was no battle between good and evil, no final decision, if he really had no choice at all. As simple as it was, he found it all confusing; he was going numb, but his face was flushed, hot from Tukoraka's insult. He thought that maybe he could resist for one final moment, just for the sake of his memories.

Ashes as big as flakes of gray snow were blowing, and Randal realized that he'd been dreaming. Tukoraka would be expecting an answer. He looked up and saw him reposing on his throne, assured that all was going his way.

"When I was very young," Randal said, "I wanted to rule the world."

Tukoraka nodded, and his eyes sent emerald sparks flying among the ashes.

"When I was a believer building the Seven Ethers, I really did rule the world. The people who move the day forward, making spiritual progress and shaping the future, are the real rulers of the world. I still have a hunger to rule, but it's not a healthy appetite. It's just hunger, like a vampire's hunger for blood. It is vanity and delusion, and I have been deluded for too long. Find yourself another Icarus, because I don't want to be blinded by the sun anymore."

"What!" Tukoraka thundered. "You are saying no to me! I'll tear you to pieces and keep you alive as a pile of worm-eaten garbage!" He rose from the throne, clutching the air murderously with his hands of bone.

Randal's blood pumped like energy-draining poison, sucking away all fear, leaving desperation and paralysis. The air in front of Tukoraka's eyes shimmered; red and ready to spit hellfire. The ugliest ideas of torture swam in Randal's mind as the demon king took the final step toward him. Huge bone hands reached down to seize him, but before they could, a fist of wind swooped in and knocked Tukoraka through the ash-filled air, flying and bouncing off the ground, back up to his throne like he was as light as a voodoo doll. He struck the throne so hard his whole body cracked, and his head got knocked askew.

"So it is," Tukoraka hissed. He raised a shattered hand. "You have failed me, but I must abide by your decision and the spiritual laws. Go and serve yourself. You speak of hunger, then return with hunger for your final days; you will walk the earth as an outcast. You will have a thirst for blood that can never be quenched."

The ash thickened to a gray blizzard with bone whiteness moving at its heart. Randal saw bones whirling in a white star pattern, spilling out Tukoraka's host of demons. They were countless gaping skull faces, cloaked in ash and fire. Bones shook, rattled, clicked, exploded in showers, beat the earth, and bounced up again, dancing as skeletal feet. The skull faces began to spin in a fiery circle, and howling began. Howling that was more a foreshadowing of the evil to come than a sound. It merged with blurred fire and the pall thrown into the sky from the volcano.

Tukoraka's legions were angry, swarming, and ready to feed on the earth. As the skulls ascended, a long shadow touched Randal, putting fire and thirst into his soul. His body was torn from him and flung to the ground. It rolled, tumbled, and came to rest, nothing but a heap of melting flesh with ashes stuck to it like flies.

A great howl carried and faded in the distance with the plume drifting from the volcano. Tukoraka's fiery host was gone, sent to wander in the spirit realm until the appointed time. Light as air and thirsty as a desert wind, Randal's spirit ascended. A terrible curse was on him, but he didn't howl in pain, anger, or loss; he was no demon, and wailing and howling weren't his song yet.

Everything fell to silence. Tukoraka lay heaped on his throne, sleeping, waiting for his new day on earth. Higher up in the ether, Randal's spirit mind viewed a landscape that had vastly changed. The volcano was a festering sore, spraying up blood from aneurysms bursting within, and it fell as light black rain on a jungle canopy, becoming more and more like an emerald mass of writhing serpents. The clearing remained, brownish and spotted like a reptile's hide. Swarthy men, withered and shrunken to the size of Pigmies, moved near Tukoraka's throne, ministering to him. They were naked except for red feathers in their tangled hair. Some of the men dragged the blue-green rot that had been Randal's spirit-realm body to a pit of blue ash. It fell limp and leaden into the pit, a puff of ash rose, then the men began heaving shining objects - jade, diamonds, emeralds, topaz into the pit. The gems were boulder-sized. When the body was completely crushed and buried, Randal felt himself begin to drift free of the sacred spirit realm. Blood continued to spray from the mouth of the volcano, and the hunger it gave him was maddening.

CHAPTER NINE: SUNFLOWER

Len's mood was grim; beyond the windshield, night was drifting by quietly. Something more than the supernatural events at the cemetery had disturbed him, but instead of trying to search it out, he let his thoughts wander. Exhaustion and heat worked as a sanity drain, bringing out sweat and anger; it worked through confusion to help men see the light and want to either punch or shoot it out. No one could function well in such heat, except maybe a trance dancer.

In his drained state, he saw ashen tints on everything, as if the world were only half-real, peripheral vision, and connected to another dimension of devouring shadows. Len's thoughts wandered to his wife Marion, and he figured the world had really started to go blurry for him with her death. He'd lost his steady perception of society, and now everything was foreign and tumbling. Life was foolishness in the shadow of a guillotine. Try to save the big, doomed world, and you'll forget to save your family. In Marion's last ten years, she'd been mostly alone with Jennifer, counting Len's broken promises - he was going to retire, they were going to live in Australia, and on and on. He broke every promise, keeping on the go, making every investigation his last, and in the end, when he asked himself why, the answer he got was possession. One person decides to fight city hall, another to fight crime, and he supposed

that even people who decided to shoot for Mars looked level-headed beside a guy who documented the lives of dead Nazis while hunting witches and vampires. Sane people were a myth; once possessed by a cause, people were insane, in love with their own private answers. But if you were going to be possessed one way or another, then it was your duty to choose the best demon. He hadn't and had always known it. Now guilt had finally caught up with him, and it bothered him that he hadn't given his wife the time or affection she'd deserved. Death spoke to him in mocking tones, telling him he'd wasted many years chasing old Nazi ghosts. It meant the Nazis had cheated him after all; they'd left him alive so he'd realize too late that their haunting memory had stolen his years and his wife. He'd always believed he would die first. Marion was safe at home. How was he to know they'd find a way to poison her?

Poison and death rose like a shadow in his mind. "Something's happened to Jennifer!"

Len's sudden exclamation startled Dan. He jerked the wheel, almost driving onto the shoulder. "How do you know?" he said.

"It's this feeling I have. I had the same feeling the night Marion was poisoned."

Engine roaring, spitting heat, the car tore uphill and entered the Castle Hill street maze. Concentration, whisker stubble, and the glare of the streetlights gave Dan a lunatic's face as he careered around empty corners like a racecar driver on a familiar track. A few people were standing by the evergreen scrub marking the edge of his driveway. He recognized them as neighbors. To avoid hitting them, he drove right up on the lawn.

The alarms were shrieking, but the front door wasn't open. There was no damage or evidence of a break-in at the front. He popped out, ran up the steps, unlocked the doors, and went in. Blood and the pepper gun were on the carpet. Moving quickly to the housemaster, he punched in the code to silence the alarms. Turning, he saw that he'd dragged Len in with him like a shadow.

"Block the stairs!" Dan said. He turned and moved warily toward the patio.

A false dawn steamed in the sky, swirls of pale red like the sky was a lizard's belly digesting blood. It promised another day of flypaper flesh, and it had already given some to Sheila. She approached the house, her body running hot and cold with sweat. Len was out front dispersing a few half-dressed neighbors. She immediately realized that something terrible had happened and began to totter as blood rushed to her head. She staggered forward and got to Len, who caught her before she could fall.

The day moved into late morning, turning into a sad, tired scene in Dan's living room. Len blamed himself for bringing Jennifer along. His face was pale, and the gray light streaming through the window cast it in ashen tints. He was like a judge, condemning himself for carrying on matters until he'd killed his wife and daughter. Negligence was what it was in his opinion.

Sheila was flushed with guilt. She felt she could have engineered an escape if she had stayed. Dan believed she would have been captured, too, and he wasn't blaming anyone other than the villains. The bright lights of his inner world had faded; it seemed the enemy had eyes everywhere in the haze, and he found he cared more for Jennifer than he wanted to admit.

"Whenever I try to help, it all backfires," Sheila said.

"Forget assigning guilt," Dan said. "We've got to act fast. Right now, we need to guess where they've taken Jennifer so we can go in for her."

"How about trying that psychic lady, the fat one you did an article on?" Sheila said.

"Madam Patience," Dan said. "She could do it. Let's go. She's over on Water Street now, and dirt poor - one of her clients successfully sued her."

As they rolled off the freeway ramp, Sheila tore the plastic wrapper off a car freshener. The pine fragrance helped tremendously as they hadn't taken time to shower and smelled of sweat and herbal deodorant. Len was shaving in the back seat and looking a little better. As long as they were moving, he had some hope.

It was an old downtown neighborhood they entered; bleached wooden fences, weeds growing hydroponically in piles of concrete chunks and bricks in vacant lots, clumps of aged houses tossed between a few small factories. Dan had loved this neighborhood years ago; his old gang used to come here for a wild time. Urban decay was tops at producing interesting junk and secret clubhouses. Water Street was a little cleaner, more paint had been slapped on it, and not as many buildings were empty. Likely, the neighborhood would crumble, choke, and die some more before it smoked with the dust of renovation and gentrification. Maybe it would cough up more famous people. Randal was from this neighborhood, and the house they were stopping at belonged to the famous tabloid psychic, Madam Patience. She was a celebrity in a cheap way, but her old frame house looked more homey than cheap. It had a garden of sunflowers and a winged sun disc painted on the door above her sign.

Water condensing from two air conditioners dripped down on the sunflowers, and they could hear industrial noise from a nearby recycling plant - a sound like cars being sawed in half. Dan led the way up the narrow walk. He glanced at the window behind the sunflowers; it was fogged with grime and, in that way, resembled genuine opaque glass. The house's presence was comforting; it belonged to a simple, troubles-burying past. Time stood still here. Dan had tried to write a fiction tale once, about a ghost that lived forever in 1933. Now he remembered that it was here in Madam Patience's house that he'd gotten the idea.

There was no doorbell, but several loud raps brought an answer. As the door opened, they saw that it was a boy. His complexion was pallid and yellowish, and his blond hair was lifeless. A blast of icy air came with his, "Who yah lookin' for?"

"I'm here to see Madam Patience," Dan said, giving the watery-eyed boy a firm look. "It's an emergency. I'm an old friend."

"Okay," the boy said, "but my grandma doesn't do business in the morning."

A dim hallway with warped linoleum and peeling wallpaper led to a living room with couches against three of its four walls. Madam Patience was seated in an armchair in the center of the room. A huge paper globe suspended over her head glowed orange, and its effect was to make her look like a badly made-up corpse. Her eyes looked black and sunken in below a forehead thick with a

pancake of powder; her cheeks were like red plastic apples, and the ringlets in her graying hair had lost their spring. She wore a cheap flower-print dress that came close to matching the wallpaper in the hallway. Her figure was best described as flab-flab-flab. Just about everything about Madam Patience was cheap and fraudulent, and Dan knew the truth was that she'd rather cheat people than work for her money. She had the power most of the newer, flamboyant fortune-tellers didn't, but she was lazy. Genuine trance work could leave her drained for days, and she didn't want that.

It didn't seem natural to stand in the dim room, and Madam Patience's weak nod said, "Be seated." Dan and Len sat close to her on a burgundy couch while Sheila grabbed the couch farthest away.

Sheila looked across the dim room, her expression bewildered. Her hands fisted, then she began to dig at her knees, a habit she'd had since childhood. It usually hit her when she was trying to hide her report card or other bad news. This time, she fidgeted to hide her disbelief. Madam Patience was the phoniest psychic she'd ever imagined. The sort of psychic that would convince old Italian ladies there were curses on their garden patches that could only be removed by a ritual involving a sack of cash. Dan and Len looked ridiculous, eagerly awaiting advice from such a woman, and she wondered why Dan had done an article on her.

"It's a missing person we want you to locate," Dan said. "We have to find her right away. She's in danger. We will pay you well for information. It's Len's daughter - you don't know Len, he used to be in the mind-reading business."

Madam Patience nodded and sighed weakly, "I can barely function in this heat. It will be twice the usual fee. And I do know Len."

"I didn't think you'd remember," Len said, forcing a smile. He had worked a psychic fair with her nearly twenty years back, when she was almost slim. She'd passed his touch test then. He knew she could key in on Jennifer.

"Your fee isn't a problem," Dan said, knowing that the heat couldn't be weakening her in a place as cold as a fridge.

"Okay," Madam Patience said. "You know that I have to look for her among the dead first, then I'll pray for the door to be opened to sanctuaries of the lost. Which one of you touched the missing girl last?"

"I did," Sheila said reluctantly.

"Come and sit at my feet, little girl," Madam Patience said. "I want you to take my hand so I can guide you to her."

Sheila glanced at Dan and Len. Their faces were expectant, so she went over and sat on the threadbare Persian carpet at Madam Patience's feet.

Madam Patience's throat rattled as she cleared it. She offered a limp hand, so Sheila clapped it in both of hers. Madam's fat hand was as coarse as fish scales and cold. It numbed her fingers, and she felt her hands slowly deaden. The feeling moved up her arms like slivers of ice, cutting off her circulation and slowing her heart. A sheet of invisible mildew was on her, and she felt like pulling away. Because of Jennifer, she didn't.

A minute ticked by, with each second leading Sheila deeper into trance. A vision rose - mounds of earth were visible. She was standing at a high altitude

with Madam Patience, looking across at a world of the recently dead. There were mounds in fields, alleys, lanes, back yards, forests, sea bottoms, and snow. Where there was no earth, there were cairns. Gravestones appeared in trucks, basements, closets - no place remained secret.

Markers took shape on the mounds, each ivory stone bearing a likeness of the occupant. Slowly, the markers drifted closer, then they began to pass by fast. All around her they whirled, like big blowing leaves.

The last marker tumbled by like a final page. A solitary mound remained. It was unmarked and under swaying, moss-dripping boughs in a forest arbor. Sheila was afraid it might be Jennifer's grave, and the thought of it left her empty and weak, her blood running thin.

Loose earth at the top of the mound began to spill, and clean white hands poked out. The fingers were long and slender, very feminine. Sheila stared in horror as the earth fell away like cake. A head was rising. Melanie's face came into view. She had no expression, only a trancelike stare. Her dress was shining white, and it had a lifting power that carried her until her bare feet showed at the top of the mound.

An ivory knife with a hilt of gold rested at Melanie's feet. She picked it up like a dreamer and began to walk slowly through the tall grass. Her murderous intentions were obvious.

It all shattered in a mirror, and Sheila hit the floor with a thump. She'd let go of Madam Patience's hand and thrown herself back. Madam Patience was still in her chair, her eyes closed, mumbling some nonsense. Sheila understood some words about the sanctuaries of the lost, but not the rest.

Again, Madam Patience offered Sheila her hand, and she took it. Beyond Madam, the stained curtains billowed. Long triangles of sun played on the grimy glass. Dan and Len were still, but very tense. The curtains lifted again, and Sheila saw a blurry mass of swaying sunflowers, then fields of sunflowers. Ghost-pale people appeared, wandering aimlessly through the tall blooms. She lost touch with time and was suddenly wandering in the flowers herself. Moments of wandering and an eternity of wandering were the same. She gazed into the faces of frightened strangers and tried to remember her name.

Eventually, she crested a hill and saw a magnificent monastery below. It had a long sparkling dome. It was like the Rama Temple, with a tall arch and many towering idols. She knew she would find what she was looking for there, though she couldn't remember exactly what it was.

A woman dressed in shining white appeared among the idols and walked to the largest, a totem pole. Wind jostled the sunflowers, and the woman tossed off her dress. She stood naked as the dress blew up against the totem pole. It whipped and blew free, sailing up in a helix and gliding kite-like across the field toward Sheila. A half-human, half-animal face was imprinted on the cloth. It was one of the faces from the totem.

Ducking low, Sheila fled into the sunflowers, going downhill until she tripped on a root and tumbled. When she lifted her head again, she was on Madam Patience's Persian rug. Above, the orange lantern had become a swaying jack-o-lantern. The ghastly face from the totem pole was on it. She screamed as it slowly vanished.

Her scream pushed Dan and Len over the edge of restraint; they had to know what it meant. Gently, they pulled her up and helped her back to the couch. She fell back in cottony padding, breathing vocally, almost desperate for air. Her composure began to return.

Len remained still, holding her hand, his eyes closed. Ghostly feelings, strange terror passed through her. He knew she had been close to Jennifer.

Except for the fear, Sheila felt drained; the last time she'd felt so weak, she'd broken a leg at a decathlon and was in the hospital with nauseating drugs rushing in her veins.

Dan turned to Madam Patience; her breathing was shallow, her cheeks paling. "Did you find her?" he asked.

"We were close, but powerful spirit mediums interfered and clouded my vision. Someone with great power is hindering our efforts."

"What can we do now?" Dan said. "We need a trail to follow."

"A trance is too risky. We are up against forces that are too strong. They could possess us or kill us while in the trance state. We can try driving around, tracking her through feelings and signs. But if you do find her, you'll need a power object, something that will channel away the powers of possession."

"Who could we get a power object from on such short notice?" Dan said.

"I have one. It's a petrified root, a very old Iroquois power charm. I can let you borrow it for a small sum. Let's say a thousand dollars."

"I'll write a cheque," Dan said.

The mention of a cheque worked on Madam Patience like smelling salts. Money was her strength; her circulation improved, and her cheeks reddened. She barked a command, and her sickly nephew appeared from behind a beaded curtain. He hurried up a creaky flight of stairs, then came back more carefully, carrying a jar that contained an X-shaped root. The boy's black eyes darted about fearfully, and it wasn't clear whether he was afraid of his grandma, the root, or evil spirits.

Sheila frowned at the boy. Confusion swamped her thoughts as she tried to remember the vision. She was certain she'd located Jennifer, but now she couldn't call up the memory. Disappointment stayed with her as she watched Dan fish the root out of the jar. He held it up, giving it a sober look.

"Test it," Madam Patience said. "Let your girl touch it."

Dan set the jar on the table and went over to Sheila. He pressed the root into the palm of her hand, and it caused her whole body to shake. It was an electric jolt that knocked the confusion out of her, leaving her thinking clearly. She remembered most of the vision in the sunflowers, but Jennifer's location still didn't come to her. She sat up but remained silent as she continued to struggle with her memory.

"Spirit residue that was lingering in her has been channeled away," Madam Patience said. "Power roots of this type were once used by medicine men, but the secret of how to make them has been lost. They work best when kept near the navel, on a belt."

An occasional kick and sputter broke the hum of the car air conditioner. Dan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, and like the swaying sunflowers, dreamed himself beyond the timeworn neighborhood. It was a silly daydream in which he rescued Jennifer in several different ways. Dan knew people were always looking for heroes, and only in dreams could they find heroes in themselves. He didn't approve of wasting time on silly daydreams, but instead of trying to shake the mood, he let it run its course, realizing that dreaming of becoming a hero was sometimes all a guy had, and in dingy neighborhoods like this one, even the polish of dreams and sunshine couldn't keep a person above the trapped-in-the-gutter feeling for long.

The dreams ended, and Dan judged that the car was now cool enough for Madam Patience. He honked the horn and glanced at Len. Len remained silent, bothered by a facial nervous tic. Moments later, Sheila emerged from the house, and Madam Patience appeared in the doorway. Madam came out slowly, looking up fearfully at the sun. In her bad state of health, it was a chariot of death and distemper if anything. Her eyes were black hollows under her scarf, and with the scarf on her head and her long dress, she looked like a strange Muslim. It was the flash and glitter of cheap jewelry: earrings, rings, an ankle bracelet - that revealed her as a back-street fortuneteller, but one old and fading like the pages of torn newsprint blowing in the alleys.

Despite her ordeal in the house, Sheila got in the car agilely, curls bobbing, and moved across the seat. Madam Patience eyed the open door and shifted her weight like an elephant. Getting in was a groaning struggle, but she made it, bringing the musty smell of the house with her. Sheila didn't smell too pretty herself, and she found Madam Patience less offensive because of it. Madam Patience and her old house breathed through the same pores, and she was the sort of person Sheila found hard to believe. Too many years of junk food and cheap wine had made her a hostage to air conditioners. If she felt like what she ate, her dreams were as potent as the city dump. How Madam Patience fit into the new freak-health-and-occult age was a mystery. Image was more important than spiritual power nowadays, and most of them would die of herbal, vitamin, and blood poisoning, and not hamburger blubber.

Tires smoking up roadside dust, Dan pulled out on the blacktop. Glancing in the mirror, he saw that Madam Patience's makeup was running. She fanned herself and reached over to Sheila with her other hand. Sheila took the groping hand and immediately fell ill again. Some of Madam Patience's moodiness spilled into her. Out the window, the summer heat was as uninviting as a roaring lion. Hot wind roamed the ramshackle streets, hissing through the withered weeds and turning vacant lots into smoking dust machines. Shadows were soaring vultures, transient, searching out carrion, picking through the second-hand wreckage of an impoverished generation, and winging on to gobble up any hope for a future.

"North is the direction I pick up," Madam Patience said. She looked out her window into the weed-filled ditch like she was reading directions in the burs.

Turning north, Dan passed some smog-belching smokestacks and entered some maple-canopied residential streets.

"Wait, stop," Madam Patience said. "I have the feeling."

The car rolled over and stopped beside a playground. Dan gave Madam a doubting frown, and before he could say anything, she announced that she'd lost the feeling.

"Go west, go west!" she suddenly said with great urgency.

An hour spun by, becoming tracks in the dust as Madam Patience took them for a choppy ride around the city. Sheila had stopped listening to her; the only feeling she got was nausea, and she was sure that Dan and Len were close to cracking. They were now going downhill in Kingsfield Park. Beyond the dead weeds on a distant hillside, part of the Rama Temple - the domed portion - showed between two rows of high-rises. It hit Sheila's eyes with jewels of reflected light, stirring her memory.

"A temple or monastery," Sheila said. "I remember now. Jennifer is at a monastery that resembles the Rama Temple. I saw it in the vision before Melanie appeared and somehow erased it from my memory."

"Don't be silly, my dear," Madam Patience said. "I have no such feeling, and there wasn't a monastery in my vision."

Stunned by Sheila's revelation and Madam Patience's denial of it, Dan nearly turned out of the park into oncoming traffic. Pulling the wheel, he avoided a fender bender. Keeping his attention on the road, he pulled back, waited a moment, then crossed to the parking lot of a shopping mall.

"How sure are you, Sheila?" Len said.

"I know she's there."

"It's a trick," Madam Patience said. "It's what the evil forces want you to believe. We've got to keep searching the city."

"Let's think this out," Dan said as he parked out front of the mall. "It could be a trick. Think about the vision, did it seem wrong in any way?"

"No," Sheila said. "Melanie didn't want us to find the monastery. She attacked us spiritually to keep us away from it. I didn't see Jennifer, but I had a very strong feeling."

Len turned in his seat, and his face ticked as he studied Madam Patience. Madam Patience tried to shrink away, so he snatched her hand. She tried to pull it away, but he held it firmly. A deathly cold rush of energy hit him; he was floating in a cloud of foul mist, and he could hear voices- accursed voices, whispering, raving, and mingling as they poisoned Madam Patience's mind. Her face became a tumbling sequence of hideous masks, some of them venomously hostile. The last face was Melanie's, and Len felt his scalp lifting as he pulled away from her. "She's possessed," he said, almost choking on the words. "Dan, use your root to clear her."

Dan wanted to move fast, but he had the root fastened to his belt, and as he fought to free it, Madam Patience opened the door. Len and Sheila retreated from her, knowing better than to try to grab her. The root finally came free, and Dan threw himself over the seat, pressing it against Madam Patience's thigh. She screamed like an animal under the branding iron and quickly squeezed the rest of the way out of the car. Dan pulled back as she slammed the door.

"I'd better go after her," Len said as he watched Madam Patience move into the crowd at the front doors of the mall.

"Don't do it," Sheila said. "If she makes a scene, you won't be able to explain what you're doing."

"She's right," Dan said. "The spirits will likely abandon her now that she's of no use to them. It should be air-conditioned enough for her in there. Let's go."

Dan drove out to the highway. Madam Patience stumbled into the mall food court and sat at an empty table. She shivered for a long moment, then collapsed, her face going pale. A bald security guard saw it happen and walked over. Picking up her crushed-leather purse, he set it on the empty table beside her. He tried to rouse her. She smelled like a garbage can. "Have we been drinking?" he said, shaking her shoulders gently, remembering not to get too rough while people were watching. When there was no response, he turned her head so her face wasn't flat on the table. Her cheeks appeared swollen, so he brushed her hair out of her face and looked closer. It dawned on him that she might have choked on some food, or maybe it was food poisoning. Lifting her head, he patted her cheek and found that there was definitely something stuck in her mouth. He knew some first aid and decided to apply it. He pulled his fingers away, and nothing but hot air and the leaf of a sunflower emerged, and with the leaf, a horrifying vision of a woman trapped at a monastery. Startled, he let go, and she slid to the floor.

CHAPTER TEN: MONASTERY

A wall painting of Tangaroa's long, golden body, generating the gods and men, graced Melanie's private wing of the Northern monastery. Melanie stood contemplating the painting, soft light and colored haze from the stained-glass windows illuminating the canvas, her lustrous dark hair and white-trimmed blue robes. A few years ago, she wouldn't have understood the painting. Then she'd wanted to answer eternity with beautiful songs, believing the muses had conquered even grief. Her desire had been born in a lining of beauty.

During her short singing career, Melanie discovered glamour in some men and an ache to possess them. Men worshipped her, and she learned the importance of wealth and success from them. She began to desire the wider fame they recommended. The haunting tones of a siren rose in her songs, and when the goals of stardom were achieved, she considered that many other people possessed fame and wealth. Qualities that were fickle, ephemeral, and not really part of the soul. Melanie began to desire herself; worship herself because she was real and lasting. Perfection was in eternal life if it was in anything. With eternal life, she could worship herself forever.

Randal appealed to her back then because he offered a god that could make her beautiful forever. Men and their idols would be dazzled and love her as a goddess - love her blindly as babies love their mothers. Mostly, they would be her pets. Then good and evil wouldn't matter, because animals could be forgiven for their vile habits.

As time passed, Melanie found that she couldn't see or touch Randal's god, and the god was a trickster, demanding angelic behavior from mortals without laying out the miraculous proof of the immortal reward. She grew frightened; old age and death were approaching, and Randal, the fool, expected her to rely on faith. The very thing he lacked himself. What he had in place of faith was a taste for spiritualists who would have men and women live on as essences, ideas, and many other things that were really the same as death. To live on in the body was her goal, and she believed that even a slime-covered zombie gorging on a corpse was superior to a philosopher who had died and become a wind of perfumed nothingness.

Melanie had used her sister, Lana, to put the wealth of the church in her pocket, but by that time, gold was only rust and jewels no more than colored glass. She hadn't known exactly what Randal meant when he prophesied a Messiah, but he was channeling a spirit one could see and feel - one truly manifest with miracles and promises. She'd prayed feverishly, and her words had been the right ones. As the Messiah, she became aware of her powers and the mesmerizing spirit of Rama. Later, she learned of Tukoraka and that her spirits were only messengers. Her eyes opened to the demon king immediately, and she liked his plan for the world. It was a plan that would allow her to live forever in the flesh as a goddess.

Once, at this monastery, Dan Athusta had risen from a dream and told her about it. In the dream, he'd searched the winds, spending endless years looking for God. When a voice finally came out of the whirlwind, it said, "You have done better to search for me in the wind than the rest of men who have searched for themselves all these years. The very day a man really begins to look for me, he has found me."

The dream represented everything Melanie hated. Searching the winds of nothingness and finding contentment in the nothingness found. She had done better than to chase the wind. The fiercest winds were something she could create.

Today, the messianic messenger spirit had left her, and her voices had fallen silent around the same time she'd sent the totem demons into Madam Patience. The silence had to do with Randal. Now the spirit had to return him to his body. There were certain binding rules in the spirit world. It meant no trouble that she could imagine, so she decided to get ahead and leave with Averam. There were important matters to see to, especially the locating of certain occult objects needed to help Tukoraka through the final gate. Garth could have his sacrifice and empower his totem idol. It didn't matter to her. Rituals to empower idols were already outdated, as the demon would soon empower them all. Still, Jennifer's sacrifice would be a fitting punishment for Len. It would break him and leave him to die mad. As for Dan Athusta, he would eventually fall into a trap, and once possessed, she could keep him as one of her many husbands. No special effort would be needed to capture him. He was only one man, and he should have kept searching the wind rather than defying and challenging the gods others had found. His end would be fitting. Crushed under the golden weight of idols, he would be her slave forever.

Her decision became as firm as the Gothic arches ribbing the vault overhead. She crossed the room and went down a hall decorated in bas-relief with mythical monsters. Using a telepathic message, she called Averam, and he

appeared beside a column in the gallery. He was dressed lightly, his hairy chest and a gold necklace with a wolf's head showing in his open blue robe.

A cold breeze followed Melanie as she strolled along the gallery. She said nothing to Averam, and he walked at her side, contemplating the darkness singularly until his mind drifted into zombielike meditation.

They stopped by two wretched people sitting against a column. "They're beautiful," Melanie said, smiling at them.

Averam's mind moved out of shifting strokes of blackness. He contemplated the two priestesses huddled against the column. They were heaps of bones in black robes - gone bald, the contours of their skulls clearly delineated. Their faces were as white as blisters, and their expressions shifted as waves of terror and agony moved in their minds.

"Their prayers are answered," Averam said. "It never fails to move me when a novice begs to be consumed by the spirit. So many prayers are being answered today. The grounds are littered with our beautiful ones. This is inspiration become flesh."

Lana appeared in the gallery, wearing a loose black dress, belted and cut short. Lana looked fashion-model slim, but not starved. Her straight black hair had a red sheen that matched the red serpent coil painted on her right cheek. "We've moved the totem idol to the forest site, and it is now decorated with jewels I allocated from the treasury. I had a hard time finding workers. Too many Children are in trances and fasting."

"Has Garth returned with you?" Averam said.

"Yes, and he's miserable company when he's fasting," Lana said. "Right now, he's checking on his virgin. He trusts no one with her. It's so hard to get one; I mean, the right one without scars or deformities. Her father must have kept her locked in a dungeon or something."

"Her father is a wicked man," Melanie said.

"Luther is to intone one of Osiris' pledges of purity over her naked body," Lana said. "Garth is demanding that he remove his nose ring."

Sandals clattered on the stones, echoing so that feet could be heard approaching from every direction. Garth appeared, his usually wild hair groomed back, and his face stern but troubled. "Nigil, Zackary, and the others are complaining of an emptiness of being," he said. "Their spirit guides have left them. Nigil says he needs their guidance. As it is, he has to inflict pain on himself to stay out of the trance state. I'm used to a silent mind myself, but what should I tell the others?"

"Tell them a great host of spirits will return to fill them before the sacrifice at nightfall," Melanie said. "Randal's spirit will also return. Go ahead with the ceremony. You'll have enough people in the trance state to perform it. Averam and I won't be attending. We're leaving shortly on a trip to gather relics and deal with some other matters."

"Jennifer is weak," Garth said. "I hope she makes it through the day."

"She'll make it, but watch her closely," Averam said. "During the ceremony, be on guard while her blood is draining. If a tranced or ecstatic priest should mar

or cannibalize the body, the ceremony will fail. The idol demands absolute purity in this ceremony.”

Snakes of heat distortion rose across the field, and the hum of a plane engine diminished to a purr. The plane was carrying Melanie and Averam out of the country on a hunt for some lost relics needed for the ceremony that would return Tukoraka to earth. Garth watched the plane vanish. He was sure there was enough wind rising from the open fields to create some turbulence, but there was no moisture for cloud-making rising from the cracked earth and brittle grass.

Pines ran like a maze wall on the other side of the field. Garth liked the pines. Pines could live on almost no water and feed on their own fallen needles. Qualities of survival a thing of the forest needed. He had been trained to survive on tiny bites of food, and that made the taste of raw flesh all the sweeter. Garth was no stranger to the truth that if you ate your enemy, you would always have enough. Now, church life was softening him. He'd been fasting for two short days, and he found the hunger pains hard to bear. His stomach was a shrinking rattlesnake, coiling and striking at the emptiness being forced on it.

He had to get away from the monastery. Luther and Zackary were ripping at his nerves. They were weasels; Luther was always playing the pure-and-spiritual Krishna routine, and Zackary used his good looks to charm the priestesses. They didn't line up with Garth's idea of what a man should be. A real man was cold and serious, more raw than pure, and never a lady charmer. A real man was as stone hard as an idol, taking his cup of blood, feeding his wants without any guilt or remorse.

Parched land surrounded the monastery; even the wetlands were scabbed over by drought. Garth liked the dry feel of the land: the hiss of brown grass brushing past his knees, the snap of twigs under his sandals, and the dusty pines and their aged odors. The forest was a tinderbox, and he enjoyed the idea of a world about to explode in flames.

A wide duff path ran through the pines, and the sight of it calmed his mind. The sacrifice couldn't be soon enough; anticipation and the heat were boiling his blood. Expanded veins throbbed in his temples, and a wolf had been howling at the back of his mind all day.

As he moved silently down the shady trail, his hands ceased trembling. His flesh felt like cooling wax. The walk was doing him good. He was glad he'd put Nihil in charge and taken a break. An hour among the fragrant boughs would calm him and put him in fine form for the sacrifice at nightfall.

Jagged stones appeared, marking the end of the path, but when he reached them, he found that it didn't end but turned sharply to the south. Some ferns lined this southern leg of the path, which opened on a small clearing. He stopped abruptly, pines towered around the clearing, and sunlight had killed the grass at its center. A granite boulder was on the far side. He could see someone sitting in its shadow.

He strode boldly across the clearing. After a few steps, he saw that the person was naked, and after a few more, that it was a priestess who had cast off her robe.

Her arms were bloodied and cut. On spotting the raw flesh, he froze. The wolf in his mind howled. Garth tried to look away, but it was too late. Crouching, he watched. She was suffering from the same emptiness as the others, but her response had been to cut herself. Both her arms were sliced open and bleeding lightly. The cuts ran to the bone, and the wounds pulsed and breathed as they bled. Garth didn't really notice her face or that she was laughing soundlessly. A strange but hysterical form of laughter. Bear claws of hunger tore at his belly, and he began to drool; then the heat of the desert entered him. It shimmered and sent waves of thirst to his throat. It was madness and blood thirst.

His hand clawed its way under his robe and seized a sacrificial dagger. The dagger's obsidian blade slipped out silently and gleamed like a sliver of eternal night.

Suddenly, Garth sprang, quick as a rattler and smooth as a wolf, and knocked the priestess away from the boulder. He rolled her flat on her back, pinning her heaving chest with one knee. Keeping a hand clamped over her mouth, he looked blindly to the sky and raised his knife arm.

The knife came down, a small flash of darkness like the blinking of an eye. He'd killed her, but he didn't stop there. He drew the knife back up and stabbed her repeatedly. His frenzy abated, then he heard an evil whisper telling him to sever the head.

Stained teeth showed behind his evil grin. He began to cut the corpse, parting flesh with the blade. With a butcher's skill, he neatly cut a small piece of flesh from her thigh and lifted it to his lips.

A small meal filled his belly, and his senses returned to normal. What he viewed wasn't a pretty sight. The mutilated face on the severed head of the priestess watched from where he'd placed it, over by a boulder. The demon of self-mutilation that had possessed her was still in her and rolling her eyes.

Sticky blood adhered to Garth's face and robe. One thought was in his mind. He'd rendered himself impure for the sacrifice. If anyone found out, he would be in big trouble. He'd pleased the demon in the priestess, so he was sure it would keep silent. His eyes cleared and darted about as he tried to think of a way out. The purple robe the priestess had cast aside was over by the pines. It was clean, so if he could find a way to wash himself, he could slink back wearing the robe. No one would know the better, and the sacrifice could go on.

There were plenty of fallen branches at the perimeter of the clearing, so Garth went to work, gathering them to cover the remains. Dust, bark, and bur bits collected on his sticky body, and he began to itch all over. As sweat poured from his face, armpits, and navel, the brilliant sky above began to hurt his eyes. The sun was as bright as a sword of justice; he felt terribly exposed.

Garth nearly forgot about the head, and in his hurry to finish his work, he went over and grabbed it carelessly. On his way back to the brush heap he'd made, he felt something rough touch his hand. Looking to the head, he saw that the tongue was out, licking blood from his fingers. Yelping, he jumped back and tossed the head into the pile of brush.

Setting fire to the pile would be nice, but the forest was too dry. Everything would burn, and he might not get away. It was horribly uncomfortable standing

there in a sodden robe, so he took it off. He removed his underclothes as well. Wearing only sandals, he headed into the pines in search of water.

After a half hour of crashing around in the pines, he stopped to collect his thoughts. He was thirstier and dirtier than any animal. Another clearing was before him. Hemlock trees towered above the pines on the far side. As he took a sliver out of his arm, a lifesaving thought came to him. He remembered that hemlocks were usually near bogs and streams.

Witch-hazel bushes choked the ground at the bases of the hemlocks, and the brush tore at his skin, but he pressed on, knowing from the smell of damp earth that water was ahead.

A rank odor came from the banks of the stream he'd found. It was almost dried up, but water still trickled over some algae-covered rocks at its center. Garth drank, washed his face, then spent some time scrubbing himself clean. The grime and the blood came off, revealing white skin and scratches. As he completed his bath, he thought about the robe. He hadn't wanted to soil it by carrying it along. He was sure he knew his way back to the clearing.

Feeling better, he followed beaten trails back to the clearing and the robe. There was plenty of time; he'd be back well before nightfall, and his secret was safe.

Static snowed, killing the tune on the radio. Dan clicked it off and watched the parched meadows and forest as he drove. Len had wanted to speed things up by taking a plane, but the only commercial helicopter company covering this remote part of the province had gone bankrupt. It was a long, tiring drive, and it did put partial blinders on their fears. They'd sped through cottage country, the farm belt, deeper forest, and past lakes scattered like blue jade on the landscape. Now they were in the drought-stricken area containing the monastery.

Dan had been to the monastery a couple of times. The last time his head had been filled with foolish hopes for a new great religion. Now he found himself recalling his boyhood. He'd spent summers out of the city at places like Algonquin and Wasaga, and he had cousins in some of the small country towns. Country people were friendly and spoke clear English in this part of the province. Some areas of Toronto had the nasty folks with abusive language. It was a city that could be disappointing for people hoping to find sophistication and hospitality everywhere.

As they crested a hill, the monastery appeared. The engine growl died, and the car coasted downhill like it had seen something to silence it. A long dome caught the sun; the monastery's entrance arch was as bright as a rainbow. Older stone portions poked through tall red pines and were spread across a flat stretch of land like small keeps. Stone cottages with tile roofs were the smallest buildings present. The whole monastery, even its massive standing stones and idols, had an aura of newness - an aura that contrasted with the many blighted deciduous trees. Dan got the feeling that the monastery maintained its youth by sucking the life out of the surrounding forest.

"Wake up, people, we're ready to move," Dan said, cutting Sheila off in mid snore.

Len nodded. He'd been worrying and not sleeping.

As the road dipped, it took the monastery out of view. Dan turned off the highway. Sheila sat up and saw only a dirt road made of hardened mud ruts, then they cleared an overhang of blighted maple boughs, and a weather-bleached shack shingled with rot and fungus appeared.

"Where are we?" Sheila said.

"Next to the monastery grounds. I hope you didn't expect me to drive right in there?"

Sheila never answered questions that in any way insulted her intelligence. She remained silent as they bounced over ruts and around to the side of the shack. The shack and a sealed well were in a small weedy clearing. To get to the monastery grounds, they had to cut through a belt of red pines.

Dan shut off the engine, and Sheila popped out. She walked straight to the shack with an eye out for signs of occupancy. There were none; it was completely boarded up. The boards were rotten, and the lock on the front door was rusty.

Dan and Len took their time getting out, and when they did, they stretched and drank water from a wineskin.

"I found something over here!" Sheila shouted.

"Wait a moment!" Dan said. He quickly locked up the car and fastened a sheathed hunting knife to his belt. Two other knives were for Len and Sheila. He hadn't thought to bring a gun other than the pepper-gas shooter that Sheila had fastened to a loop on her khaki shorts. Firing a gun in the monastery would bring everybody running anyway. Dan was counting on stealth and speed, and not any ability to ambush and kill.

Shuffling through the weeds, avoiding burs, Dan and Len made their way to Sheila. She was close to the shack and not far from the well. As they drew up to her, they saw that she was standing on flattened weeds, looking a trifle bemused.

Dan looked more closely and saw that the weeds and grass were flattened and yellowed along a trail leading from the well to the pines. "The world's largest snail could've made it," he said in jest. "More likely someone rolled leaky drums to the well and dumped them in."

"What about this stuff?" Sheila said, pointing to a small mound of red-green noodles. The mound was shaped like cow dung, and it rested in the grass beside the trail.

"I don't know what it is," Dan said. "It looks like some sort of creature chewed up another animal and spit out the shreds."

"Maybe I should take the lid off the well and look inside?" Sheila said.

"Please don't," Len said. "Let's not waste time investigating every morbid thing going on near this monastery. We want to strike fast and get out. It's all we can do when we're outnumbered."

Big white towers of hot summer clouds rolled in the hazed blue sky. Dusty sunbeams broke through the treetops, revealing a large mat of mostly open duff. Fallen trees, low branches, and occasional clumps of weeds were the only obstacles. The pines were tall ones, laid in neat rows.

The discovery of the well and the nearness of the monastery added sinister airs to an otherwise summery forest. Sheila constantly stopped and looked around. She had that bad-dream, look-over-your-shoulder feeling. A tree split and sent branches cascading to the ground in the distance, spooking the three of them with the idea that something deadlier than wind and rot might be at work.

They kept moving until the pines broke near a stone cottage. Dan stepped ahead and turned, raising a finger to his lips as a signal to Len and Sheila for silence, then held out his hands in a stop gesture. Sheila and Len remained as he moved out of the pines, crept up to the cottage, and peered in the window.

After a moment, Dan knew it was safe and waved them over. They came out of the cover of the pines into the shadow of a passing cloud and joined Dan in a patch of scorched Indian Warrior weeds by the window.

Len peeked in the window, then he moved aside for Sheila. A bald man, emaciated, with a scraggly beard and reddish skin, sat cross-legged on a wooden mat, staring blindly at an empty silver bowl. He wore only white silk trunks and looked to be in a death trance. His hair could have fallen out from malnutrition. The only other thing in the cottage was an Indian bark painting of strangely elongated birds. It hung on the wall behind him.

They left the cottage. A keep-like tower several floors high was the next building. No one was at its windows or near it, so they paced up and looked in the closest window. Seeing no one, they went around and entered through an unlocked oak door. Some ebony carvings, a candelabrum, and silver bowls and cups were all that the room contained. A stone staircase was at the back of the room.

Dan held Sheila back and crept up the stairs alone. Off the staircase, a door was ajar, and he saw another room exactly like the one below. It had an ivory serpent statuette and was occupied. The occupant posed no threat. He was a long-haired, flat-nosed man dressed in a purple robe, and he was lying on his back on the floor, babbling ecstatically. His eyes were closed, and it seemed doubtful to Dan that he would see anything other than hallucinations if he opened them.

Dan descended to Len and Sheila. "These stone buildings are living quarters for the Children. Jennifer wouldn't be kept with them, so that narrows our search to the main building."

Stone towers, cloud towers, towering hemlocks and pines, a circle of towering idols, and the high stonework portion of the main monastery building; the world of objects was huge, and they were only tiny, flawed mortals fighting the giants created by evil people. They moved stealthily on the perimeter of the grounds, working their way around to the main building, knowing that the towering world, cloud shadows, and thick weeds were giving them cover.

When they were close enough to get a spy's view of the main building, they halted and crouched behind a massive block of rough stone. The block's kingly shadow and maple boughs had kept some blue-flowered weeds alive at its base.

"People are moving in the gallery," Dan said.

Sheila and Len saw some figures disappearing behind the columns. A moment later, they stepped into clear view under an arch.

"The redheaded guy with the white pattern painted on his face is Garth," Dan said. "The woman in the black dress and breastplate is Lana, Melanie's sister. That must be Nigil wearing the mask. I thought he was dead, but Chuck Tyson says he isn't. The rock slide must have disfigured him."

"I saw him in the cemetery," Sheila said.

"Melanie must be somewhere inside," Len said. "We want to find her chambers. That's where Jennifer will be."

"That big man striding out is Zackary," Dan said. "I've always disliked his arrogant attitude. He's not as dangerous as Garth. Garth is a deceptive person. He was always very polite to me in the old days."

"Of course, he was polite," Len said. "You were saying good things about the church."

"We should go around back and try to gain entrance to the dome," Dan said. "From there, we can slowly make our way through the building."

Sheila picked up a smooth stone, tested its weight in her palm, and handed it to Dan. "You should take one, Len. Once we're inside, we have to knock out anyone we encounter."

Stones in hand, they prepared to move to the next bit of cover, a mound of earth resembling an Indian burial mound. Dan went first, keeping his head down as he scrambled through the weeds, and as Len followed, Sheila saw Dan striking down at something.

Nigil stepped out in the open, and because of his mask, Sheila couldn't tell where he was looking. A moment later, he turned and went back under a gallery arch. Sheila took off, keeping herself below the weeds, running with her nose almost to the ground. On reaching the mound, she joined Len and Dan in staring down at an unconscious man. He was very thin, wearing large silver earrings. Pieces of bone were sewn decoratively into his bare chest.

"I hit him quickly, before he could make a sound," Dan said. "He was half out of it anyway. I think there are probably a lot of Children laying wasted in the fields and forests."

"I think this burial mound is filled with the bodies of Children that have wasted away," Len said. "Melanie's demons are killing many of the people they've possessed."

To reach the dome quickly, they ducked back into the pines and used the scrub along the perimeter for cover. Staghorn sumac covered an area at the rear of the dome. It was quite tall, the broad leaves spotted with red and silver from some form of drought-born blight. No one was loitering near the dome, but even so, they opted for complete cover and followed a path through the heart of the sumac. Silence and the shade created an illusion of peaceful security. Dan didn't swallow; he knew anything was possible near the monastery.

The path ended, and the sumac fringe was several meters from the dome. There wasn't a public entrance at the rear, but there were doors for taking in deliveries. Tire ruts showed in the grass, though there was no solid road.

The doors were sliding, designed to be almost invisible parts of the shell. Dan figured they were electric, and as he looked closer, he saw that the farthest door was open a crack. He led the way as they moved along the sumac fringe for a better look. When they were right across from the opening, Dan squatted on his hams, then rose up on tiptoes and leaned to each side, trying to see in. He saw nothing but tapestries rippling from the breeze rushing in the crack. The door itself was a fair size, big enough to tote an idol through.

Dan put a hand on Len's shoulder. "You two wait here while I look. It could be a trap."

Len nodded, and Sheila frowned. They both remained still as Dan moved quickly to the opening. He took a furtive glance inside and saw no one, so he squeezed inside and found himself in a maze of the biggest tapestries he'd ever seen. Crimson, gold, and purple tapestries, each piece with its own unique demonic face patterned into the cloth. They rose for four meters and stretched over like twisted banners to form a false ceiling. Everywhere Dan looked, huge distorted faces looked back. He couldn't guess what purpose the tapestries could have other than to terrify people, and he didn't have time to contemplate them.

He turned back to the door, and as he turned, he heard an electric whir. The door sealed, air whooshed, and it seemed to happen with stunning speed. Figuring he'd tripped something, he looked at the floor and the wall for a button or mechanism. He found nothing, not even a simple switch. It dawned on him that Melanie could've detected him through her demonic powers and sealed him inside. There was no way to know, and he couldn't risk making noise while trying to force the door, so he began to move on, hoping for the best and that Len and Sheila would take cover and wait.

On the outside, Len and Sheila had already dashed up to the sealed door. There was no crack to pry or pull at, and Len eased Sheila back, holding her arms to keep her from pounding on the metal door. She came to her senses, and they ran their hands over the smooth surface, trying to find hidden panels or buttons.

When they were sure they couldn't open the door, Len stepped back, and Sheila turned to face him. "We'll wait. If Dan doesn't return, we'll have to get in another way."

"How long should we wait?" Sheila said, frowning impatiently as she shifted from foot to foot.

"No more than ten minutes," Len said. "I think Dan will be all right. I just hope our luck doesn't fail us."

A huge white anvil-head cloud sailed overhead, dropping a net of gloom. A twig snapped loudly, and a man stepped out of the sumac. He was lanky, bald except for a ponytail, with silver rings in his nose and ears. His eyes were trance blank. He stared at them but said nothing.

"Our luck has failed us," Sheila said.

Before Len could answer, he was jumped by another man who had crept around the dome. Sheila was knocked back as they went to the ground, but she recovered in time to draw her knife and jab it in the air, warning the first guy to stay back.

Len had been trained to fight hand-to-hand in his youth, while his attacker was mainly clawing at him with dirty hands and broken fingernails. Len gripped him, threw him over, and pinned him long enough to strike two punches into his throat. Froth came to his lips, and he fell unconscious, but he was a possessed priest, and an ugly web of hopeless feelings transferred from him to Len. Len rolled away, reeling from the effects. He shook his head, and the spirits failed to gain a grip on his mind.

Crystals from Len's talisman showered the ground as he sprang up. He swore; it wasn't a good time to lose the talisman. Sheila had her knife at the ready, but five more priests were emerging from the bushes, a dirty zombie-looking lot, some bald, some with wild hair and beards. Three of them wore purple-and-black robes while the other two wore baggy silk trousers. They were all similarly possessed, with vacant eyes.

Sheila sheathed her hunting knife as they began to move forward. She reached behind her back for the pepper gun, and when they were close enough, she brought it out, squeezed the trigger, and swept a jet of the gas across their faces. It took them down like a stun ray would; only they were conscious enough to choke and claw at their faces.

"Let's get out of here!" Len said, and without hesitation, they dashed into the sumac and headed for the pines.

Musty odors of rot drifted from the tapestries, and as Dan moved deeper into the dome, he noticed faint blue smoke in the air. Rising air made sails of the cloth, giving the faces a nightmarish reality. He came to a bend in the aisle and saw smoke creeping along the floor. The smell of charred meat and the sickly perfume of strong incense hit his nose like a blow. It was what he imagined a crematorium would smell like - fumes of death that would bring up your own vomit to strangle you.

Rising discomfort forced him to act; he knelt down and ducked his head under a tapestry, then pushed through to another aisle. He continued to cross the aisles, moving out of the tapestries and onto the open floor space. Now he was near a white marble altar and a jade-plated Set serpent idol. Below the altar on multicolored tiles, a gold-robed priest knelt by a large brazier. The brazier rested on a chimera of iron animal paws. Faint blue smoke and heat distortion rose from it.

The priest lifted his bowed head and reached over into a silver urn beside him, pulling out a human hand and forearm. A congealed mass of shredded tissue hung from the severed end. Dan winced, fearing it might belong to Jennifer, but his fear faded when he saw the ornate silver rings on the hand's fingers.

The priest mumbled three words: O-Amagaaa, O-Karhenhou, O-Kamela. Then he tossed the forearm into the brazier. It landed on the coals with the hand open, and as the heat seared it, the hand closed and opened crookedly. It shriveled as it sank.

Dan ducked back behind a curtain, put his hand over his mouth and nose, and closed his eyes, forcing his heaving innards back into place. He waited a moment, and when he'd gained sufficient strength, he went under the curtain and moved swiftly across the tiles. His worn moccasins made no sound. On reaching the priest, he slugged him over the head with the rock Sheila had given him and held the body as it slumped to the floor.

A quick walk along the base of the altar took him to an open view of most of the dome. Three blue-robed priests were blocking the lower public exit, and they were facing away from him, looking out into the masoned half of the building. On the other side of the altar, an access ramp ran up to a small gallery that stretched around the dome. It was empty, and from there he could reach the higher floors in the front section, where Jennifer would likely be imprisoned. He moved quickly, crossing the altar and pacing up the ramp, thinking himself lucky the Children weren't gathered for an even more abominable service than the one he'd just witnessed.

From the gallery, he went through a corbelled arch and down a hallway. This part of the monastery was austere, bare stone walls and floors - a modern imitation of ancient architecture. He stopped at the first door, which was solid oak with brass plating, and agonized over opening it. He had to check for Jennifer, but he couldn't afford to lose his cover by surprising some priests or priestesses. As he reached for the knob, a bell tolled loudly.

Dan drew back from the door, and the bell tolled on. Grimacing, he searched his memory for what sort of service the Children would be holding at this hour, as it was getting late afternoon. There had been no late-afternoon activities on his previous visit; the afternoon was a time of private prayer.

Hurried footsteps echoed down the hall, and a clutch of priests passed at the far end. Dan went in the door quickly and found himself in a dim storage room. There were racks of clothing, mostly robes and decorative cloth belts. Moving farther into the room, he saw a teak cabinet full of chalices. Several ritual swords hung on the wall. Footsteps brushed past the door, causing him to duck behind a rack. When he stepped back out, he found himself face-to-face with a bejeweled skull resting on a cabinet. The gems were real: turquoise in the eye sockets, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds set in the gold-burnished bone. If he were a thief, his work would've been done, but being who he was, the skull brought to mind the impotence of wealth against death. With a smooth motion, he swept the skull off the cabinet. It struck the floor and shattered, sending jewels bouncing under racks and cabinets.

A bar of gold light appeared on the floor in the center of the room; a cloud had passed, and sunlight was beaming in. He turned and went to the window, which was no more than a vertical slit in the stone wall. The Children were gathering over near the idol circle, and many of them were starvation thin, moving over a parched landscape that didn't resemble summer or fall. It was more like a forgotten season in an ancient land where humans were colorful but lifeless scarecrows.

It was a little later than Dan had thought; the sun was falling over the hills, leaving a shimmering trail of gold as beautiful as the gleam of a mythic chariot. His awareness of evil spoiled that beauty - he could see the watching eyes of demons and not the passing glory of gods.

The high priests and priestesses began to appear below. Garth, Nigil, Lana, Zackary, and a dozen others were present. They wore gold jewelry and ornaments, and their faces were painted for a ceremony. As they moved away from the gallery, headed for the Children gathering by the idol circle, Dan became painfully aware that Jennifer wasn't with them. Some other key people - Melanie, Turkazim, and Averam - weren't there either.

It was time to move. Now that the building had emptied, he could give it a quick search and perhaps find Melanie and Jennifer somewhere inside. Dan took a sword from the wall and pulled a hooded black robe from a rack. Throwing the outfit on, he stepped out the door, feeling as morbid as Nihil as he pulled the hood over his head. The hall was as silent as a pharaoh's tomb, and the rooms he looked in along it were like a pharaoh's treasury. Dan figured that the Northern Ether's collection of occult and ritual objects was so vast it could stun even a reincarnated King Solomon. Every room was crammed and stuffed full.

From another fortress-style window, Dan checked the situation outside. Garth was leading a procession of priests, priestesses, and Children from the idol circle to the forest. It was a colorful death procession of people who belonged to idols, and it made Dan shudder when it occurred to him that he would've been one of them had things been a little different.

He reached the tower staircase, and from the view he had outside, he knew it was a huge edifice. He walked swiftly up the stairs to a floor of opulent priestesses' quarters: beaded entrance curtains, deep carpeting, peach-and-gold walls, silk pillows, lace curtains, harps, gold basins, gilt mirrors - everything was pleasing to the eye. One common feature that ruined the interior design was the demonic forms and faces painted on the ceilings.

No one was on the tower floors, but there was an array of material beauty that would've tempted Anthony of Egypt with thoughts of arson. Dan had the small top floor left to search, and it was the bell tower.

Dan burst through the door, drew his blade, and spun to cover the room. There was no one to do battle with, so he moved quickly to the window. The procession was disappearing in the distance like Quetzalcoatl, the brilliant snake god. It dawned on him where Jennifer was; she'd already been taken to the place of ceremony, somewhere in the woods. He would have to move quickly, or it would be too late.

He spun from the window and suddenly stopped dead in mid-flight to the stairs. Light was pulsing from a crack in a sarcophagus standing upright near the door. He hadn't noticed it on entering; he'd only had eyes for movement then. As he watched, the front of the sarcophagus exploded, showering the room with chunks of stone. Randal stood before him, looking to be in perfect health, dressed in the purple and gold of a high priest.

Randal's eyes fluttered open, and his head moved free of the scalloped stone interior. Dan stepped back, keeping his sword up as the rest of the sarcophagus collapsed like a busted flowerpot, leaving Randal standing in a heap of large fragments. A barely perceptible glow burnished his face.

"You've finally joined us, Dan," Randal said.

"Unfortunately for you, Randal, I haven't. I'm sorry, but I have to send you back to purgatory."

Randal held up a hand to stave off Dan's sword. "So, you're a fairy tale hero who slays evil with a sword. You should know that evil left alone murders itself."

"And demons left alone destroy worlds."

"Would you strike down a man cursed by both God and devils? Even Cain was spared the blows of vengeful men."

Randal grinned, and Dan took note of his whitened teeth. "You've become a vampire."

"I've been made to be like all men. My heart thirsts for truth and justice, but my flesh is hungry for blood."

Power shone in Randal's eyes, and Dan's sword suddenly flared like a sliver of sun in his hand. He let go of the hot handle, and it clattered on the floor. As Randal swept one arm up, Dan dived across the floor, then a wave of liquid light cascaded out the window, and Randal was gone. Leaping up, Dan went out the door and dashed, robes flying, down the stairs.

After a long flying stumble at the bottom of the stairs, Dan sprinted down the hall to the gallery. As he ran under an arch and into the open, he met up with Sheila and Len and stopped.

Sheila lowered her pepper gun. "You almost got it," she said.

"Oh, I forgot about the disguise. Listen, we have to hurry. Jennifer isn't here, so she must be at their place of ceremony."

"Let's go," Len said, "but go on ahead if I can't keep up."

It would have been faster to run straight through the idols, but Dan had already had troubles with statues, so he went around them. It was hard going in the field; the dead grass was twisted and bunched into a choppy sea of clumps, making it impossible to keep a steady pace. The constant jumping over islands of grass drained Len, and the sunset began to smear in his eyes like blood on cotton. Things were different for Dan and Sheila; they were runners, and body chemistry quickly charged their limbs and minds with power. They saw a red banner sunset, even though their destination promised to be a grim one.

A number of trails ran into the pines. Logic told Dan that the big procession would have followed the broadest one. A ways down the path, Dan slowed and let Len and Sheila catch up. Smoke scrolled in the sky ahead; they were near the place of ceremony.

They moved in silence until the pines broke at a clearing that was more like a huge crater. Cable-stiff dying vines ran over some jagged boulders at the edge of the depression. They took cover and surveyed the area. It was mostly dead grass and rusty brown clover. About a hundred Children were gathered near a huge totem pole. None of the faces were Raven or Coyote, but they were cosmic and animal-like, older than native Indian gods and too grotesque for good art. Four large pine logs were burning in trenches around the totem pole, and they had been placed to face in the four cardinal directions. A kneeling priest was chanting a euphonious mantra, and the whole scene was aglow from the soft fire of sunset filtering through the hemlocks on the far side of the clearing.

They spotted Jennifer near the fire, among the priests and priestesses. The sight brought mild relief. Picking her out hadn't been easy. She'd been dressed in the purple robe of a priestess and didn't appear to be fully conscious. Two priestesses supported her.

"How can we extract her from a crowd of monsters like that?" Sheila said.

"Easy," Dan said. "With my disguise, I can move in close and signal when I'm ready. Toss some rocks and yell, and they'll go after you and give me an opportunity to snatch Jennifer."

"That's sure to be much more difficult than it sounds," Len said. "We'll have to put the head priests out of action. If we do that, we can escape the Children. They're too weak to pursue us."

As the priest continued his chant, Garth and Nigil stepped closer to the fire. Garth fell on one knee, and Nigil turned to face him. After wetting his fingertips with oil from a small bowl, Nigil anointed Garth on the forehead, under the chin, and inside each wrist.

"Answer the spirits," Nigil said. "Are you ritually pure?"

"Yes," Garth answered.

"You may conduct the ceremony and pour out the libation," Nigil said.

Garth rose as Nigil stepped back among the priests. "Prepare to bind the sacrifice," he said as he drew his sword, then he waited as Jennifer's robe was removed. She wore a white dress underneath. A leather strap hung from her right wrist. She looked weak and in a state of trance.

The sword gleamed with sunset fire as Garth traced a silver pentagram in the air above his head. And since all eyes were on Garth, Dan moved quickly into the Children, heading for the crowd of high priests.

"Stop the ceremony!" yelled a priest emerging from the hemlocks. "This high priest is ritually impure." The accuser was Zackary, and he carried a gray sack over his shoulder.

"What is the meaning of this?" Garth roared as the pentagram faded.

"You charge impurity. Present your evidence to the spirits!" Nigil shouted.

"The fast has been broken. This high priest has partaken of human flesh!" Zackary said. "Here is the evidence!"

Zackary untied the knot in the string on his sack and lifted out a human head. The flesh had shriveled, making it unrecognizable. He held it up by the hair for a moment, then he tossed it high in the air. It didn't fall but floated across the clearing and hung suspended in the smoke rising in front of the totem pole. Everyone stared up at it, and it suddenly shrank like a deflating balloon. Drops of blood fell from the neck, splattering Garth.

"Nigil will conduct the ceremony for me!" Garth exclaimed through blood-stained lips. "Here is your reward, Zackary!" Liquidly, perfectly, Garth threw the ritual sword. It arced and tumbled across the clearing, flashing with the rays of the setting sun. Zackary leaped out of the way, or so he thought, when to everyone else it looked like he leaped up to catch the sword with his chest. He was pierced clean through and choked up blood, staggered, and fell dead in the grass.

None of the Children ran to the body. Some of them smiled angelically as Luther anointed Nigil. Once again, a pentagram was traced in the air.

Dan shuddered in the heat, the zombie-like actions of the Children making his flesh crawl. He'd been hoping for a brawl among the priests, and he now regretted not snatching Jennifer during Zackary's diversion.

Nigil fell to his knees and began to chant. Dan waited as the chant became frenzied. He began to fear that Nigil would become blood-mad and pounce on Jennifer, so he signaled Len and Sheila.

Before they could act, a strong voice spoke from the hemlocks. "Stop this vile ceremony!" The voice was Randal's, and everyone looked to him except Nigil, who continued with his wild chant. "This priest is crippled and deformed! He can't act in the role of high priest!"

Garth drew his sacrificial dagger and held it firm like a cutthroat as he took a few steps toward Randal. "Don't interfere!" he yelled, "It's too late to stop the ceremony now!"

"You'd better address the spirits!" Randal said. "They don't seem to hear you!"

Two columns of soot-black smoke were shooting up from the snapping logs in the fire trench, taking the shape of horns above the totem pole. A sudden puff of ashes ballooned and whirled over the heads of the people. Dark tendrils whipped and curled around Nigil, moving like fingers, probing him for deformity as he continued to chant madly.

Garth turned back to the totem pole. The other priests, priestesses, and Children were grimacing and taking steps back from the smoke. "No!" Garth screamed. "The ceremony must be completed!" A cunning look developed on his face, and he lifted his dagger and lunged at Jennifer. Immediately, Dan stepped in to block him, and he caught the knife and twisted it back into Garth's shoulder. Momentum carried Garth farther forward, and he fell to Dan's side, colliding with one of the priestesses supporting Jennifer. An agonized howl flew from Garth's lips as he tumbled to the grass with the priestess, and that was because the knife had reopened the wound Jennifer had given him.

Knocked free of the priestesses, Jennifer dropped to the grass. She landed on her rear, a dazed look in her eyes. Frightened enough to forget about Jennifer's fate, the priestesses fled into longer grass. The Children were now disturbed and confused, which made it easy for Len and Sheila to get through and put a block on Garth.

Dan turned to Nigil. The smoke enveloping him suddenly dissipated, and he fell to the ground beside the fire trench. His chant had been broken, the offended spirits had taken his tongue, and the gleaming pentagram remained in the air above him. He couldn't dismiss the spirits now, and he couldn't control them either. They would possess and destroy as many people as they could.

Using her gun, Sheila gassed several priests near Jennifer, then she shoved Luther from behind, sending him staggering blindly toward the fire trench. Len used a rock to bounce a hard blow off Garth's skull, but failed to knock him unconscious. Dan believed Nigil to be the real threat; the evil spirits had filled him, and he was getting up. His mask came loose and fell as he rose, exposing a face trenched with long violet scars and two ulcerated holes in place of his nose. He glared at Dan with furious eyes and opened his mouth.

A tongue of fire shot from Nigil's mouth, and inches from Dan's face, it curled down, drawn to the shaman's root on his belt. Thunder rolled, a black crater

appeared in the grass below the root, and the fire was gone. Its only effect was to leave Dan slightly staggered.

A rolling cloud of smoke engulfed Nihil. He charged out of it, headed straight for Dan. The logs in the fire trench hissed, and tormented screams came from Children, priests, and priestesses as they stumbled about in the dead grass with evil spirits burning in their breasts, brains, and bowels. A great host of spirits had returned as Melanie had prophesied, but they had returned angry. Garth and Nihil's improper channeling of magic had turned evil against evil, creating a self-devouring whirlwind of demons.

Dan managed to drive Nihil back to the trench, but he returned from the smoke, seized by a great power. He leaped high in the air and landed a short distance from Sheila and Jennifer. He bounded on toward them and was almost on them when the ground suddenly split and bright white pulsed over him. He stopped, his eyes frozen. Something had mesmerized him.

The light condensed, pulsing inward. Randal appeared and walked slowly up to Nihil.

Dan suddenly realized the truth: Randal had somehow gained great power and was using it against his own church. It meant the demons didn't have him completely.

Randal seized Nihil by the shoulders, forced him down with ease, and sank his teeth into his neck. Nihil's body went through a series of spasms and lame movements as Randal quickly finished him off.

Using the chaos to their advantage, Sheila and Len managed to get Jennifer into the cover of the boulders. Dan started out dashing for Randal, but ended up dashing toward a light. It was blinding, hypnotic, and it seemed like he was running on forever, down an endless chain of summer evenings - then, suddenly, the feeling was gone, and he saw the last rays of sunset and stars emerging in the twilight. He'd been mesmerized, running in a dream, and now he stopped to find that Randal was gone with the light. Scorched earth was before him, and Nihil's wasted corpse lay on the ground.

"Get over here!" Sheila yelled from the boulders.

Leaping over the boulders, Dan found Len at work trying to revive Jennifer. Len lifted her hand and slapped it, but it fell back limply to her side. A milky film had developed on her eyes, and her lips looked bruised.

"God knows what sort of drug they gave her. If it is drugs," Sheila said. She looked to Dan, then to his belt, as if something had caught her eye. She turned, still staring at his belt, and her face went blank. Dan glanced down and saw that the shaman's root was glowing in the dark. He quickly guessed that it had gathered some of the mesmerizing light Randal had radiated.

"The last time I saw a case like this, it was jimson weed poisoning," Len said. He slapped Jennifer's cheek, but he got no reaction, and the blow brought out no pink. He glanced at Dan, then turned, stared at the root, and was mesmerized.

Dan frowned, trying to figure out what to do about the root. Perhaps if Sheila and Len were mesmerized, he could simply command them until he found a better answer. He decided to order them to look up from the root and see if that would snap them out of it.

"Please look up," Dan said, and to his surprise, Jennifer looked up while Sheila and Len remained still.

"Nod if you hear me," he said, and watched as Jennifer nodded while Sheila and Len remained frozen. "Okay, now I want you to wake up."

"I'm awake," Jennifer said in a stony voice.

"I mean, really come out of the trance, really open your eyes," Dan said. He seized her shoulders to shake her. The contact gave him a jolt. He saw a glow pass like liquid silver from the root to her face, then sugary light burned the film from her eyes, and a normal expression returned. She smiled like she'd been having a good dream and kissed him with reddening lips.

Soft radiance returned to her dark locks as they brushed against him, and her breasts became firm and warm as they embraced. He was mesmerized again, this time by a beautiful young woman, and he didn't want to pull away from her. But he had to because he was forgetting himself and the situation they were in. Len and Sheila were out of it, and the children were stumbling around on the other side of the boulders. He released Jennifer and turned to Len and Sheila. He shook them both, and they came alert just as insane screaming broke out in the clearing.

"You were both hypnotized, Jennifer has recovered and ..."

"That's great!" Len said, turning to embrace his daughter.

Sheila focused on the chaos. After glancing at Jennifer, she ran to the side of a boulder. There were tentacles of glowing smoke creeping on the ground, and darker smoke was blowing up like a mask in the descending twilight. Firelight reddened the gaping mouths and fierce eyes of the carved faces, and on the ground, Children were crawling in sick supplication. They seemed blind, some of them screaming and others mumbling. No fire touched them, so if they were burning, it was a demonic thing inside them.

Dan, Jennifer, and Len pressed up behind Sheila and watched. The totem appeared to be falling through the smoke, then the illusion became reality, and it really did fall, belly-rolling down like a big serpent to writhe and crawl over the hissing logs in the fire trench.

The hungry mouths of the totem found victims and tore at their flesh. Demons howled in the throats of the dying. It was a scene gone too hideous to watch.

"Let's get out of here," Len said as the monster continued to feed. "The fire is out of control. If we don't start moving, the flames will overtake us."

CHAPTER ELEVEN: VAMPIRE

Men who polished their hatred with the same zeal as they did their brass buttons appeared in the dream. Their faces were pale and drawn. Marching heels clicking on the stones as they came out of rows of tanks painted in olive-camouflage.

Assault rifles rattled, and the noise became a fast count of the dead. Fleeing people were struck down. Flowers of fire, blood, and splintered bone decorated

the falling corpses.

The light of a terrifying world shone in the soldiers' dark glasses, and their uniforms made them the law. It was a decree of darkness, and death was their glory. They had made a judgment day of bullets and bones in the grayness and shadow at the end of the world.

When the innocent were dead, the men marched on, killing each other, reducing the planet to piles of bones and skeletons of steel. In the end, a single corpse remained on the ground, and it was struggling to its feet. It was Nihil, torn and bloodied, a vampire with dripping fangs. He began to walk, and Jennifer knew he was searching for her.

She woke up shivering and found Dan's arm around her. "Another premonition?" he said.

"No," Jennifer said, pressing closer to him. "I dozed off for a moment. It was a dream - a nightmare similar to the premonitions. Nihil was in it as always."

"When Len gets back from the doctor, we'll decide what to do about it."

Clear golden light and warm summer made the picnic grounds a glowing green expanse, and the bright colors on shorts, T-shirts, caps, bikinis, and headbands made the scene lively. Across the carpet of grass, Sheila's laughter was another loud color. She wore a red bikini and was involved in a tug-of-war. Her team pitted against a team of policewomen. Jennifer couldn't imagine Sheila having nightmares or secret fears; she was the most gregarious in her group and would most likely be one of the loudest in any group. She had an innate ability to enjoy life despite the dark powers at work on its fringes. Sheila dug her heels in and tugged, and Jennifer felt that she needed to dig her own heels into life - to be less withdrawn so she'd be in the game. Sighing, she wondered if Dan was making a mistake by falling in love with her, since she would never be able to satisfy his outgoing personality.

Dan was thinking the opposite - like the rustling maple boughs and summer clouds, Jennifer brought a comforting coolness into his life. He was thankful not to be getting mixed up with another fiery woman. One proud fashion model for a wife had been enough.

Jennifer nudged Dan, and they looked over from the bench to Chuck. Chuck was sitting at the end of a row of picnic tables. He was avoiding all exercise and activity and had the airs of a spy.

"He gives me the creeps. His dark glasses look like the ones the fascists in my dream were wearing."

"He's been tailing us since we returned to the city. And he really shouldn't be here. There's more than pop in what he's holding. Drinking at a charity picnic for victims of drunk drivers is a disgrace. He looks visibly older now, like he's aged ten years in a week. Must be the booze working its magic."

"I saw him on TV early yesterday. He's now the police liaison to the Rama Temple."

Dan frowned. "So I hear. He's almost like a public relations man for Melanie. I'm not sure if he knows much about what's really going on. Melanie probably controls him with simple bribery."

A red cart came into view on the road, dipping down into the ravine park. A man wearing the old 4-wheel style of roller skates pulled it. Len was in the back, and although he was across the field, the smile on his wide mouth was clearly visible. He spotted Jennifer as she waved and waved back. Heading over the field, he hardly looked like a guy who had just visited the doctor, fearing heart problems. Len looked much younger than sixty-five, although he wasn't dressed overly young - he had on laceless brown shoes, light-brown slacks, and a polo shirt. Age hadn't caused his hairline to go too far south, and his wiry frame wasn't swollen in the middle.

"You picked a strange mode of transport," Dan said as Len sat with them.

"They're bringing people down the hill to keep cars off the grounds. I was just talking to the kid taxiing me. He's a member of a group that wants to pull cars off the road."

"You mean no cars?" Dan said.

"Less cars. The way he sees it, the right of citizens to walk in public without being threatened by dangerous automobiles outweighs anyone's right to drive. They want auto-free pedestrian streets with vehicles in their own special lanes."

"They're right, you know. People are crushed and maimed every day because guys like Chuck over there have a right to drive. We accept the carnage caused by mad drivers and rage over a few murders committed by mad men."

"People won't think about anything that might inconvenience them," Len said. "Hanging a murderer is convenient. Safe roads might not be."

"You look well," Jennifer said. "The doctor must've had good news."

"Sure, Doc Litvak says I still have a twinkle or two left in my eyes. My heart problems turned out to be indigestion. Travel and excitement have thrown my system into chaos."

"Then it is good news," Dan said. "We were planning to fly you home."

"I wouldn't have gone. Not now that I know Jennifer's problem isn't trauma or the lingering effects of the drug."

"What exactly is wrong with her?" Dan said.

"Nigil was bitten by Randal, and Randal is a vampire. That means Nigil's soul is in limbo while he waits to rise as the undead. Jennifer has been picking up on it and Nigil is working to feed off her. He's draining small bits of energy from her when she has her psychic spells. When he rises from the grave, he'll head straight for her because she has a power he wants to absorb. We have to find him and destroy him with the stake before he finds us."

"That's if he rises," Dan said. "Randal isn't the usual sort of vampire. Maybe his victims simply go into limbo."

"He told you he was cursed," Len said. "The evil being that did it would know it would torment him to see his victims rise from the dead. It's part of the punishment. Randal is getting around it by feeding on worthless people like Nigil."

"Where would Nigil's body be?" Dan said. "It must have been dragged to safety, or it would've been incinerated in the fire that destroyed the monastery"

grounds.”

“I think I know where the body is,” Len said. “Tell us, Jennifer, in the hallucinations, where is he?”

“I see corpses, earth, and ashes - all three or one of the three each time.”

Dan raised his eyebrows. “You mean his corpse is in a burial mound at the monastery?”

“Most likely,” Len said. “We should go out there and get this over.”

“The place is abandoned now,” Dan said. “Maybe Randal is still there.”

“He wouldn't linger there,” Len said. “I think he's following some sort of plan.”

Their conversation ended for a moment as they watched Sheila's team line up for a final go at tug-of-war. Over at the picnic tables, Chuck crushed his pop can in his hand and threw it in a waste bin as he walked off toward the parking lot. The balmy weather was for the light-hearted, and it didn't suit Chuck. With his heavily lined face, dark glasses and long limbs he looked like a skeleton pasted over with some leathery skin and make-up. As a plainclothesman, he wore just that - plain clothes. He was one of those cops who tried to look inconspicuous and failed. Everything about him spelled cop. Dan had strong feelings about Chuck and was tempted to confront him. He resisted such feelings. Chuck still had the weight of the police force behind him, so the only sensible strategy for Dan was to swallow some pride in order to be unfettered when the time came for action.

Sheila's team was victorious, and the people began to mill about, organizing some new events. She went back to the picnic tables for a drink and headed for the bench with a paper cup in her hand. Her childlike Cheshire-cat grin was a dam holding back elated laughter. Sheila celebrated small victories as if they were momentous occasions, and that was a feature of her personality that gave her great determination. She was determined to win at everything.

“Come on, people,” Sheila said. “You look like spectators who wandered over from the retirement home. Some races are coming up. Who's going to be my partner?”

“We have to leave?” Dan said. “We're going to deal with Nigil. You know our agreement. We stick together.”

“A forest fire fried Nigil. So where do we find him? I mean, the soot on your windshield might be him.”

“We know that his body survived intact,” Len said.

“Okay, so we go after him,” Sheila said. “But let's eat first, because I'm sure I'm not going to be hungry for a couple of days after seeing him.”

Jennifer shook out a red-and-white checked tablecloth, and it fluttered in her hands as Sheila weighed it down with a cooler. Plenty of food was free at the picnic, but it was mostly barbecued meats that Len couldn't eat. Dan was again turning completely away from meat, especially chicken raised and fattened in a cruel environment. Jennifer lived on cold salads, and Sheila would eat anything that wasn't falsely labeled as health food. Salads were passed; they prepared and garnished their plates. Heavy rains had come in on the coattails of the heat wave, bringing a lush look back to the area. A pleased picnic crowd

enjoyed the day. Some running and tumbling on the thick bed of grass. Dan led off what became some light conversation, and he watched as games and races chained in time. A colorful blur of motion was alive in the sunlight, and a carousel of merry shouts was proof that nothing evil had ever happened.

On the other side of the city, an unexpected sign appeared in the sky - a brushstroke banner of gold riding the breeze high above the bell tower of the Rama Temple.

Randal was experiencing a strange awakening. His coffin became a river of visions: the past, present, and future, as chaos fell through the core of reality that formed Toronto. Faces of hunger and pain roared through him, leaving him in shreds. His energy faded; he couldn't sustain himself. He was grimly aware of a universe that existed as a vast spider's web of desire, passion, and pain, trapping all men so that they might be devoured by a beast made of their own guilt. If only his mission were complete, then he could fast and let the hunger destroy him - tear him apart and rip up his soul like flesh, so that only the great howling at the end of the universe would remain. Randal was struggling to believe in his sanity, to have faith in it. He had to believe that he was at least half-human, or else he would succumb to the thirst and live only to feed.

The gold in the sky fell like rain, and Randal appeared on the bell tower, kneeling with his hands covering his face. He couldn't weep, but even the memory of tears was pleasure, and it was as sweet as rain on a warm summer night in comparison to the hunger.

He stood up, knowing he must carry on; he looked over the stone wall at the summery city, and the sight of elegant women moving on the street forced him to the stairs.

The brightness of the street was dizzying and painful, but he'd found no sustenance in Nigil's blood and so was forced out in the daylight by the hunger. Putting his trembling hands in his pockets, he stared down at the sidewalk like a bum and kept to the shadows as much as possible. As he drifted toward quieter streets, people he passed stopped and stared. They all shook their heads in disbelief and walked on, knowing it couldn't really be Randal.

He reached a run-down neighborhood with narrow litter-strewn streets. Bleached posters fluttered on boarded-up buildings. Few people were about. Moving to an alley, he loitered just out of sight, waiting for a lone woman to pass. He hadn't been there a minute when he heard footsteps coming up the alley behind him.

Randal turned, blinding light reflected from a badge deep in the alley. He began to shuffle away, assuming it was a policeman approaching.

"Hey, buddy. Hold it right there!"

It was a woman's voice. Her command was a wonderful announcement. Randal halted and turned. A policewoman was approaching - the most beautiful policewoman Randal had ever come across. A cloud of blond hair blew around her large eyes, small nose, and full lips. Her gun was drawn; apparently, she'd mistaken him for a mugger or burglar.

"I want you to put your hands up and turn to the wall," she said. Coming to a stop, she appeared to lose her resolve. Her expression softened, she holstered

her gun, and her lips trembled as she stared at the flickering light in Randal's eyes. Suddenly, she was a woman in love. She embraced him, kissed him passionately, and buried her head in his shoulder. As she rubbed her cheek softly against his, he began to burn. The thirst struck him with a feeling as strong as physical transformation. Her cap fell to the ground, and he delicately removed her shirt and bra. As he gazed at her pale neck and breasts, all light exploded and vanished into darkness. Since his soul now belonged to a being of darkness, he embraced darkness, plunging into it.

It was a dramatic change of scenery, a verdant landscape ended in ashes. A line had been drawn by a finger of flame, or perhaps an arm of fire had been severed and left to writhe until it disintegrated to ashes. The fire hadn't been a healthy ground creeper to fuel new growth; it had destroyed everything. Rows of charred, broken pines pointed to the sky like the busted stakes of a giant impaler. Heavy rains had made the ground boggy, ashen porridge, swilled around jagged outcroppings of rock and the remains of trees. Although the highway had been cleared and repaired, the chalky color of ashes was ground into it. Patches of mist burned up by the sun drifted, obscuring low-lying portions of the road.

"I'm amazed it stood up so well," Sheila said as the monastery came into view.

"It's all stone, steel, and cement," Len said.

"Yes," Dan said, "but it survived in a way that doesn't make sense."

They could see that the stone keeps, cottages, idols, and the main monastery buildings stood on dry ground, while the higher surrounding ground was boggy. All of the trees and other vegetation had been burned off, and the stone buildings were blackened like ovens. One side of the dome was covered with baked-on soot where the wind had driven the flames against it, and a green-brown tarnish marred the metal on the other side.

Huge tire prints from tractor-trailers were sunk into the parking lot. The monastery had been stripped; only the scorched buildings and idols remained. Dan knew the building interiors would be badly smoke-damaged, but he guessed that the church would collect enough on insurance to build another monastery as well as refurbish this one. After all, they paid no tax, and most of their labor was free.

Jennifer stepped out of the car onto the lip of a big rut of hardened mud. Ashes blew across her sneakers and bare legs. She was glad she'd worn shorts and not a good dress or slacks. The others followed, and when the doors slammed, they were face-to-face with the ruins. It was as if the monastery existed in another sort of time, changing at a much slower rate.

Dan took a spade and stake from the trunk and slammed it shut. "I can see four burial mounds from here," he said. "I suppose we can start at the closest one."

They moved over the cracked ground like pilgrims traveling under the sunset of a barren land. Dan's walk was confident, the spade over his shoulder. Sheila and Jennifer gave the ground apprehensive glances and were ready to jump at any movement that might be more than blowing ashes. Some big leaves of ash blew up in their faces, and Jennifer batted them away like they were insects.

Len's walk was as somber as a pallbearer's, his face streaked with ashes he failed to wipe away.

At the first mound, they made an interesting discovery; its side had been dug out, and a clay-smeared skull looked out at them from the fresh hole. There was a body track and footprints in the soft earth around the mound. Dan stood on the track and looked ahead. A stone keep was directly in front of him, about a hundred meters away.

"Whoever dragged out that corpse is likely in there," Sheila said.

"There's only one set of footprints," Dan said. He squinted at the setting sun. "We should be able to handle one person, as long as it isn't Randal."

Fire and brimstone had rained down and destroyed this temple. The evil priests had fled. Whoever was trying to resurrect the dead was a ghoulish violator, and Dan kept that in mind as he led them through the ashes to the keep.

They stopped several meters from the steps and door and listened. Ashes swirled in eerie silence, without vegetation; the breeze was mute. A grid pattern marked the sooty stone blocks in places where vines had been burned off. The heavy door was gouged and charred.

"Stay back while I go in and investigate," Dan said, raising a hand. After planting the spade in the ground, he boldly walked up the steps to the door. It wasn't locked and began to glide open. The hinges suddenly fatigued and popped, sending it crashing to the stone.

Dan sidestepped the fallen door as he headed inside. What he found was hair-raising - a room bare and smoke-blackened, with a coffin made of polished red wood at its center. The coffin was open, and he could see the grisly contents: a hideous burned corpse streaked with mud, ashes, and dried scabrous gore.

Dan's face became a mask of disgust. He turned and stepped back outside. "I guess we've found him," he said.

A dim figure stepped out from the shadows at the side of the building. It was Chuck. He raised a wide-barreled revolver. "I'm afraid you've found something you weren't supposed to find," he said.

"You're mad," Dan said as he turned to face him. "Trying to resurrect that hideous thing."

"Am I?" Chuck said. His expression was intense, and stars of fire from the sunset reflected in his dark lenses. "I was here, and I saw how he died. He'll return to life with a vampire's power, and I'll have what Melanie denied me."

"That's death, not power," Len said.

"You don't realize how terrible it will be," Jennifer said.

"Shut up!" Chuck said. "You're all going to know death and how terrible it is, because I'm going to feed you to him. He's stirring even now. Yes, I'll care for him, feed him, and when his powers are full, he'll kiss me and fill me with the beautiful power of the undead. I'll have the power I've always wanted. Power like Randal has."

"You fool," Dan said. "Don't you know Randal is cursed?"

"I see you're going to be a problem," Chuck said. "I'll have to shoot you now. I'm sorry, but this is too important. I can't afford to take chances."

Chuck aimed the gun, then a long guttural hiss came from the doorway, and he turned and froze. He lowered the weapon. Sheila and Jennifer gasped. Sunset was running to twilight, casting purple shadows on the thing in the doorway. It was starkly unreal; its flesh, so badly burned, resembled a rubber monster suit. Ashes clung to it, and though the face was a mass of mutilation, the eyes were intact and alive with yellow light. Huge fangs protruded from a gaping, lipless mouth.

Ravaged facial flesh grew taut as Nihil hissed and stepped out the door, and it was at that moment that Chuck cracked. He dropped his gun, stepped forward, and fell to his knees. "Let me help you," he said, sweat pouring from his waxen face. "We'll rule together forever."

But the thing that was once Nihil didn't even hear him. It heard only an ocean of blood and the howl of thirst. Chuck had gotten too close; it flung itself on him and began tearing at the flesh of his shoulders and neck. The creature had surprising strength and agility. It slowed its attack for a moment in order to pin Chuck, and Chuck let out a final mad scream as it sank its fangs in deep.

Jennifer fell to her knees and choked, Sheila covered her eyes, and Len looked away. Dan kept his eyes on the monster. Calmly, he scooped up Chuck's gun and stepped over to the feeding beast. Blood spilled like syrup as it lifted its face from Chuck and hissed. The gun cracked, spat fire, and the thing fell back, arms and legs flailing. Dan fired three more times, smashing its head to strawberry pulp and bone splinters. The headless body fell like a broken monster doll on the walk.

Dan tossed the gun away, but he wasn't finished. He went over and got the spade. Shock lifted, and Len came to life, moving in quickly to roll Chuck over and drive in the stake. Stepping past him with the spade, Dan used a hard and precise stroke to drive it point-first through the heart of the headless vampire.

CHAPTER TWELVE: RELICS

Farther south, a fierce sun rides high over the equator, and one would expect creatures of evil and darkness to have been vanquished long ago. Today, the light is retreating, and darkness is creeping under tropical canopies. Powers of voodoo are bursting from fertile mud and soil - as genuine as the seaweed, shells, roots, and clods of earth they drag with them on jungle trails, and as real as the moldering flesh hanging from their bones. Last night, a priest of the sun god uttered his disbelief of such powers just before slime-coated claws slashed away his voice.

Heads are shrunken and decorated with new feathers. New heads, maybe even your head, and the ghosts of men that never doubted the heart-ripping cruelty of the sun god must now not doubt the cruelty they have found in the jaws of Melanie's demon god.

Randal Rama stepped out of the stone house into the shade provided by a bark porch and looked past rough-hewn support logs at the light of the setting sun.

It burst through umbrella-like amate trees and hit his eyes with the force of splinters of ice from an exploding glacier. He didn't look away or flinch. He wasn't in El Salvador to run from the light or the darkness, and now he'd come to believe himself a fusion of the light, the darkness, and the vile earth.

Good priests of the light spent their lives in search of the very same appetites they had cast off. It was a mistake for them to want to soar to heaven on the day of death when it was the fertile flesh and earth of the grave their spirits needed. Evil priests of the darkness were people who sought the tomb early. They were skeletons, with neither flesh nor earth, as they worshipped an alien astrology of hate. The life they wasted was best symbolized in the blood they poured on the sand - the wasted libation of murderers. Randal's heart was suspended like a dull lump of coal. He didn't pray for his flesh, humanity, or spirit to be stripped away. All men owned a vile thirst for life and had to drink or die. He would not deny it. A man who tried to purify himself would become a monster and not a god, and as a monster, be blind to his hideousness. "I am hideous," Randal said to himself.

Palms rode the wind like snapping streamers and flags as he paced down the stony trail. He emerged on a black sand beach, wondering what he was trying to save the world for, because if Tukoraka could be stopped, things would go on as before, but there would be no great transformation. He would still be cursed, and the church would still be dead.

Sunset's final rays spilled in over the swells and combers, ran across the black sand, and cut into his eyes and heart. He saw the crystal of a tear and the flash of a bloodstained sword. The pain was ancient - a steely blade at the throats of all men and women. It came to him that the world would go on - yes, and Tukoraka wanted to make it a land where black magic would rule. He could try to kill the demon, try to slay the past and himself. The gods of the past would be sacrificed so that new people could be born, grow, and sacrifice to the godlessness of the present. These were days when heroes were little guys, caring human beings in a world of people less than human. If he abandoned the past and ancient evil and favored the modern world, a new day would come, but would it be a better day?

Mist rolled in, curling around driftwood and the sharp stump of a wind-smashed palm. If Randal could see through the mist, he could see anywhere, even to the columns of steam hissing from newly formed volcanoes. The light of endless moons was his light, and it led his eyes over palm fronds and sloping thatch-roofed houses. In a state of near trance, he was rising to the night. Below, he could see the image of a Cihuatan temple, and in one of its rooms, Melanie and Averam stood before a dog idol. They were studying its crooked teeth and the talisman it wore.

Melanie reached out, her arm bare, a thin silver bracelet at the wrist. The talisman was fused to the idol, but she lifted it off without difficulty. "A simple piece," she said, "but it has much power here. More than Immanuel will be expecting."

"It has to get us the key. We must have it," Averam said.

"We'll get the key. I've planted it in the minds of the others that the voodoo priests are the killers, and that Immanuel is safe. His hour of prayer is now, and he usually prays alone, so this is the time to strike."

They strolled over to a stone altar that was also the burial marker of an evil priest of ancient times. Melanie knelt and gently placed the talisman to make a facial orb between two horns incised in the stone. As her eyes grew icy in trance, Averam used an ivory wand to stir some milk, blood, and honey in a silver bowl. With great delicacy, he used the wand to place some drops at the tips of the horns.

A vision of smoke blowing off the crater of a newly formed volcano twisted in Melanie's eyes. An eruption was coming. The earth trembled. A solid column of steam formed and sparks showered into the sky, but the volcano yielded no magma. It remained a hot bellows, and finally, a massive chunk of red clay flew out.

The clay crumbled, smoke escaped, and tightened to the shape of a human finger as it rose to the moon. Briefly radiant, it was a withered, crooked finger, like something severed from the hand of a huge ghost.

A slim, big-boned man with short black hair split from a group at the front of a stone church and strolled down the street. Sobs and excited voices carried on the night air. The whiteness of the moon and the whiteness of Spanish colonial architecture washed over his face, arms, and legs, giving him a dark-ivory sheen. Night was like a cooling engine radiating the last of its heat, and there was a hint of the coolness that would come at midnight. Immanuel hardly looked like a priest, being dressed in sandals, khaki shorts, a jungle-green T-shirt, and a necklace of wooden beads.

This evening, Immanuel had opted for traditional prayer at the Ceiba tree. He approached his destination with doubts. He didn't want to pray unless he had all the right thoughts. Often, he put off prayer when his thoughts were dark and uninspired. Tonight, he had little choice. Eight members of the church had been killed by zombies. Personal protection wasn't what he would pray for because his belt buckle was actually an ancient ceremonial stone that warded off zombies. Unconsciously, he brushed the stone with his fingertips; it was worn so smooth it resembled pocked metal. He wasn't sure what it was exactly. It came from his father and was to be worn always. No one else in his church knew it was a sacred object.

Immanuel hesitated for a moment before turning down the path to the Ceiba tree. How had Melanie learned of the buckle's sacred nature, and why had she demanded that he turn it over to her? It troubled him; nothing was right. On one side, voodoo priests were raising zombies, and on the other side, Melanie stood with her veiled threats. His branch of the church didn't recognize her as the Messiah, not yet - but he would be unable to stop the council from doing so if she put the zombies to rest as she'd promised yesterday. It seemed that she could do it, but not through the power of God. One of her high priests had arrived - Averam, and murderous brooding was on this man's face. He was venomous and sly, like he'd swallowed a root of evil that would give him power over zombies.

As Immanuel reached the Ceiba tree and its isolation, he decided he did have the right thoughts. Those who surrounded him had minds full of evil, and if not evil, then fear. If he prayed for heaven's better answer to the problems, his thoughts could only be the right ones.

Warm feelings emanated from the Ceiba tree like a balm for grief and confusion. He put down a cardboard box he'd brought, took out some wild flowers, and spread them at the base of the tree. Loosing the string on a pouch of rose petals, he let the breeze help him sprinkle them on the grass. He'd brought two candles, but he doubted they would stay lit in the rising wind.

When preparations were complete, he sat and began to meditate as a prelude to prayer. The shape of the rising moon was distorted, like a teardrop. A dark scar floated across its face; it was a crooked finger. But Immanuel didn't consider these omens. His thoughts were silent, without words, and the world was a mandala - one vision and the many things of harmony that made the vision.

Wisps of fog crept out of the nearby trees and grew in form and size, becoming squid arms of vapor. Immanuel continued to meditate, vaguely aware of the creeping fog's touch. The impression was slimy, a cold shock, like brushing against weeds or fish while swimming.

His meditation broke suddenly, and he realized that something supernatural was happening. Yet he couldn't move as icy tentacles of fog had him pinned to the ground. From his helpless position, he saw several crooked fingers of mist floating toward him. They were drifting straight for the sacred stone he wore as a buckle. His leather belt had been fashioned without snaps to make the buckle hard to remove, but the fingers worked together, clawing, scratching desperately, gouging the leather and plying at the sacred stone.

Immanuel tried to struggle, but the tentacles immediately choked him, and he lost consciousness for some moments. When he opened his eyes, his belt was torn off, and the mist fingers were floating off with the buckle. The tentacles were crushing him now; it was like someone was winching them tight. He began to pray, knowing death was near.

Like an answer to prayer, bright moonlight cascaded in the trees, and a man rushed out. Immanuel recognized him; it was Randal Rama. It was also proof that the fog had killed him. Otherwise, he wouldn't be seeing the dead. Randal seized the fog tentacles and tore them loose, taking the tensile strength out of them so that they began to disintegrate as they floated away on the wind.

Immanuel gulped air and knew he was still alive. His heart was beating, racing. Pain like a dull knife was cutting through his innards. A feeling that told him his organs were crushed. When he tried to move his legs, he found them paralyzed, and blood came to his lips. The fog had succeeded after all; he wouldn't survive.

In death, he found Randal's face to be strangely beautiful. Randal looked down at him compassionately as he choked up more blood, then he knelt and kissed him on the cheek. At first, it was a priestly kiss, then weakness overcame Immanuel, and he felt a scorpion sting his neck. Warmth filled him, and it was like he was sinking in quicksand that caressed his entire being.

Garth watched as Buddhist monks, outfitted in bright red habits, dug a trench. It was part of the restoration work on one of the temples at Norbulingka. He soon tired of watching their bare arms pump shovels and turned to view a portion of the craggy Himalayas. This was a distant land of isolated peaks; up

face-to-face with the gods, if there were any gods that hadn't been smashed down by the Chinese.

After drifting some with the panorama, Garth's thoughts returned to the immediate. He turned back to face the monastery and spotted Lobsang emerging from a door set beneath a stone parapet. An object wrapped in purple cloth was in his right hand.

Garth pondered Lobsang's character; friendliness came to him too easily, too easily for it to be real. Perhaps he was trying to be likable because he considered Garth a very important foreigner.

Lobsang's walk was rhythmic. He stopped nose-to-nose with Garth. "This is it," he said.

Garth stepped back and looked at Lobsang with suspicion, but he found it impossible to read anything in his face - his features were so strongly Oriental they seemed unreal, like a living mask. "Good, you have trusted me. The Dalai Lama will be very grateful."

Lobsang held the object in front of him and unwound the cloth, taking care to keep it hidden from the monks behind him. A silver dagger, inscribed from hilt to tip with tiny images of ancient, extinct animals, lay in the cloth. "I give it up readily. If you spirit it to the West, the Chinese won't be able to destroy it."

Garth recognized its authenticity. "I'll hide it on my person until I get to Lhasa. The Chinese won't search me. I'm their guest."

"The penalty is death for smuggling religious objects. You would die in prison before trial. In Chinese prisons here, men have turned to cannibalism to survive. If this makes you shudder, you can still return empty-handed."

"Cannibalism, how frightening. I'm aware of the gravity of my actions. It's worth the risk."

"There is one problem. A huge landslide has blocked the main trail. It isn't a major setback. There is an outpost of Red Guards a short distance from here, to the north. They have a plane, and since you're a state guest, I'm sure they will fly you in."

"Good. Let's set out now while it's still early."

Both men wore padded, oversized gray coats and looked bulky and bleak as they passed to the rear court of the monastery, where thousands of colorful and ragged prayer flags fluttered on lines strung on bleached poles. A bronze dragonhead was set on a corbelled arch that marked the beginning of the north trail. They remained silent as they started down the steep face of the mountain.

After a few minutes of easy going, the trail leveled out. Hills composed of enormous gray boulders overshadowed them. Rock paintings and scripture beautified many stones. Colorful likenesses of Buddha looked down on Garth. At one place, he stopped to admire a twenty-meter-high painting of a beast god with a horned headdress and elaborate necklace. The god stood on a reposing yak, and it was a god Garth could admire. Peaceful Buddhas, he didn't admire.

A bend in the trail opened on an immense, barren valley that sloped gently away to the rim of the mountains on the horizon. Here, the trail became

slippery and was blocked by rockslides in places. The beauty of the landscape was soon taken away by the difficulties it posed. Garth's sense of time vanished, replaced by the endless aching in his healing shoulder.

A green army truck suddenly appeared on the face of eternity, and they made their way up to a two-acre shelf of rock that held the outpost. There were a few Chinese-style buildings, similar to Quonset huts, and a small landing strip. The truck, according to Lobsang, was used to ferry officers around the small base. Garth put it down to Chinese stupidity that they would build a base in the mountains that had no apparent purpose at all.

Two soldiers wearing the Red Guard uniform of green with a red collar spotted them approaching and readied their rifles. It looked like they were going to shoot. Lobsang threw his arms up and waved. He glanced at Garth. "I know the commander," he said. "Wait here while I explain things."

"Will do," Garth said, sitting down on a small boulder. "Go ahead."

Garth's haunted spirit fell still, and the strange emptiness of the mountains allowed pain, fatigue, and silence to fill him with longing. He watched Lobsang disappear into a sheltered hut with the soldiers and was thankful the journey was almost over. This wasn't his territory. He preferred the savage jungle. Chinese killers didn't impress him; he'd killed enough of them to see them as victims rather than masters. The thing with Chinese soldiers was that they didn't have raw blood thirst anymore. They were like the legendary Cambodian monsters that would kill a million people by bopping them on the heads with hammers or in some other equally ridiculous way. They were cruel, efficient killers whose motives were ideological, and Garth hated people who spouted nonsense as a reason for murder.

Garth's solution to pain was to force himself to enjoy it, and after twenty minutes of enjoyment, he saw Lobsang returning in a truck with the Red Guards. The truck pulled up beside him, and the Guards got out with their pistols drawn.

"You're under arrest," said the grim-faced commander.

"Who are you?" Garth said.

"General Wang, and I know who you are, a poisonous agent of the Dalai Lama."

Garth gave Lobsang a hateful glance.

"I apologize, Garth," Lobsang said, "but informing is part of my job."

"Hand over the sacred dagger!" General Wang commanded.

Garth swallowed, and a bitter taste rose in his mouth. He felt like spitting on these treacherous men, but he didn't. He took the dagger out of his coat and handed it over.

General Wang rubbed a crooked scar on his cheek. "First, I'll tell you what I use a dagger for, then you can tell me what you use it for. You see, I don't like spies that believe in foreign gods or any god. There is no great God. I'm going to use this dagger to stab you in the testicles. Time will pass, and when they become infected and swell, you'll scream, but your great Western God won't be able to help you. Cry out and find that only my cruelty exists. And in the end, sadly, you will join the skeletons over there in the ravine."

"What I use a dagger for is sacrifice," Garth said. "You see, I worship demons, and I plan to sacrifice you to my demon god."

"What!" General Wang exclaimed. "You think you can insult me. I'll have you beaten now."

Garth's face took on the color of the mountains. Icy peaks were in his eyes, and they shone with tangible hate. But General Wang was somehow blind to what was happening; he holstered his gun and smiled as he lifted the dagger. Then his smile vanished. His arm and hand were frozen, and he was seeing Garth from a new perspective. Garth's eyes burned, and his lips were moving slowly.

"Do it!" Garth snarled, and the General's lips went as white as maggots. His mouth opened, but he was speechless. Against his will, he slowly lowered the dagger and jabbed the point into his testicles. Bloodstains came with his screams; he slid the blade in several times with inhuman efficiency until his crotch hung with shreds of gory cloth. When he was finished, he stood and whimpered like a dying animal.

Lobsang and the Red Guards were awe-struck. One guard dropped his gun while the other held his at a clumsy angle and vomited. They remained silent as Garth took the bloody dagger from General Wang's limp hand.

"The General has lost his senses," Garth said. "Who is the next in command?"

"I am," said the burlier of the two guards.

"Good. I want you to prepare a fire pit and a spit. Before I fly to Lhasa, we're going to eat dinner."

"Should we roast a quarter of yak?" said the Guard.

"No," Garth said as he wiped the blade clean. "We'll be having spiced leg of Lobsang for dinner."

In the hallucination, he saw the slow flash of a silver dagger, a filament of blood trailing from the hilt, and then blood fell in drops, marking the equator on the globe. One bead of blood shone brightest, and it was in Africa. He turned to the stone, a sacred stone Melanie had overlooked, jutting like a giant axe from the hillside. With his legs spread, he put his palms on the warm face of the stone and felt the kinship of the rock, a distant memory of a time when the continents were young. Then he walked into that memory of Gondwanaland.

A shining path of sunlight ran across the jade-blue Indian Ocean, and it was a sparkling fire that put his soul in flames. Consumed, his ashes were a vision, and Athura Mazda's fury of light and darkness returned him to earth. His awareness was of papyrus-fringed lakes, palm-thatched huts, and the steamy splendor of the jungle.

Sudden pain hit him; his hands were brilliant and blinding, but when he lifted them from the stone, they were as white as ivory. He turned as the horizon swallowed the last beams of the sun, and he was no longer near the blackened beaches of El Salvador; he was a flyspeck at the base of a stone tower named the Statue of the Devil. This was Hell's Gate Gorge, Kenya. Randal's thoughts came into focus. He knew where Turkazim was and quickly calculated an overland route.

Randal found Turkazim in the morning, and he followed him to the dhows in the harbor and down the Makadara Road. Turkazim was dressed in cheap khaki, looking quite ordinary, and if it weren't for Randal's enhanced senses, he would've faded into the crowd. This was Old Town Mombasa, and a hard place to follow anyone.

Turkazim was in no hurry; he moved to the beat of the crowd as he made his way in the warren of twisting, narrow streets. He led Randal past goldsmiths, silk dealers, and spice merchants. Bright tropical flowers were everywhere, and they left an afterimage that hurt Randal's eyes so much he narrowed them to slits and followed what scent of Turkazim's blood he could pick out of the spice-laden breeze.

A sense of aimless wandering gave way to a feeling of going somewhere as Randal melded with the crowd's mind. But the good feeling didn't last long. Turkazim's scent suddenly disappeared, and Randal looked around and spotted him hurrying through an arch made of metal and elephant tusks. He then entered a large house half a block past the arch.

Randal followed, passed the house, turned, and surveyed it from a tiny alley running off the narrow street. It was a large house with intricately carved balconies, and the door Turkazim had gone through belonged to a small silversmith's shop.

Turkazim wasn't long. He exited the shop and looked up from the walk like he expected to see someone watching from the clouds. He headed in Randal's direction. Randal stepped back into the shadows and watched Turkazim pass. He was carrying something heavy in a burlap sack, and it rattled like a length of chain.

The crowd swallowed Turkazim, and Randal strode out of the alley and over to the shop. A bell tinkled as the door closed, but he saw no one at the counter. He browsed, looking in glass cases and admiring filigree work until he found what he was looking for near a back corner - a length of silver chain hanging from a spike in a board tacked over with purple velvet. A huge studded collar was attached to the chain, and there was an empty spike that had held the chain Turkazim had taken.

Randal felt the weight of the metal and found it to be heavy iron with a tissue-thin plating of a silver substance.

"An excellent novelty item," a man said in Swahili.

Randal turned; a clerk with a golden bald head had appeared at the counter. "What is it for?" Randal said.

"Hunters like to buy them. They're a joke item. The chain and collar are specially made to hold the Rahilla man-beast. Only there is no such beast."

"I see. Where would I go to hunt the Rahilla?"

"You would go to the lost city of Keti if there were such a place. No one has been able to find it. It's buried under the jungle somewhere."

"Then I guess I'll have to leave the Rahilla to someone else."

Randal pondered the Rahilla and its meaning as he left the shop and wandered down the street. His nose worked like a bloodhound's, and he eventually traced Turkazim to the Two Fishes Hotel. There, he found a spot by a layered fountain

where he could watch the main entrance without being observed himself. He waited patiently for an hour. Blood hunger was putting a metallic taste in his mouth. He'd been trying to avoid feeding. His mission to stop Tukoraka had kept his mind active; sometimes, he forgot who he was in the face of hunger.

Just as he was about to go off and quickly relieve his thirst, Turkazim walked out of the hotel. He was dressed for an expedition, wearing a broad-brimmed felt hat, long trousers, and a jungle-green bush jacket. He tossed his pack on the grass and began to shuffle up and down the walk. A minute later, a battered Jeep pulled up, and a man with a sweat-soaked shirt got out and gave him the keys.

Randal tried to think of the best way to follow Turkazim, but he couldn't because of the siren-like music of blood rushing in nearby human veins and the soreness in his whitening gums. As Turkazim pulled away in the Jeep, Randal forgot about him and made his way to a coconut grove near the hotel. From the grove, he spotted a beautiful copper-skinned woman standing near a coral pillar. His steps became measured; he was hunting, but not for the Rahilla.

By nightfall, Turkazim had followed the hard roads to the far north and forced the old Jeep down an overgrown jungle trail into an area that could only be entered during the dry summer. He abandoned the Jeep, leaving it under a natural umbrella of waxen fronds, and worked his way down to a spot where a heavy growth of vines ran over a jutting boulder. Unsheathing his machete, he began to hack at the vines. They gave way quickly to the razor-sharp blade; curtains of red foliage fell away from the face of the stone.

Turkazim stepped back, put his hands on his hips, and looked at the cleared rock. A skull-face was crudely chiseled into the stone. Its cracked, dry lips pulled back in a smile that formed the traditional headhunter's warning. This was the marker he was looking for, and after stroking his machete on a piece of sharpening belt attached to his pack, he began cutting a path through the vines, working his way to the rear of the boulder.

He carefully cut away the thorn scrub at the rear base of the boulder and cleared earth and stones from the mouth of a hole that led down under the rock. The hole was just wide enough for him to drop his pack through, and it slid and fell to a dry rock floor. He listened to the smack of the pack with satisfaction, noticed a swarm of thumb-sized ants rallying for an attack on a mound several meters away, held his hat on, and went face-first into the hole. A few hundred pebbles rained onto the cave floor in front of him.

He got to his knees on the smooth, cool floor and opened and closed his stinging hands a few times. It was absolutely dark. Groping around for his pack, he found it nearby and rummaged through it for his lamp. Potent bluish light sent a wash of shadows retreating up the cave. He was in a narrow section, and the curved ceiling had a belly at the center, giving the impression that it was about to collapse.

Fatigue had fuzzed his thoughts, so he worked his way down to a wider area with a table-flat floor and positioned his pack against the wall, using it for a pillow as he stretched out. A fist-sized spider creeping on the ceiling above caught his eye; a lightning-fast swat with the flat of his machete turned it into a leftward flying spray. After rinsing his mouth with some tepid water from the

canteen, he tried to sleep. Evil whispering in Bantu and Swahili nibbled at his mind, convincing him that shrunken heads were nearby. He enjoyed the cursed voices, lucid flashes of fear, and falling screams of evil ecstasy for a few minutes before sleep closed over him.

When he awoke, he began the arduous journey through the cave, traveling the two kilometers to the far end, ducking stalactites and avoiding pools of stagnant water.

Tall ferns shielded the mouth of the cave, and he swept them aside and found himself in dense jungle. A rain of tiny sunbeams filtered through the canopy, and the steam and ripe scents gave him a haunting awareness of slimy predators lurking in the shadowy silence. In front of him and running off to his right, flowering vines spilled up the broad, crumbled steps to a jungle-choked pile of dressed stones and tilted towers that were the ruins of the Sultan of Keti's palace. He got around the palace walking on the clear earth inside a row of giant ferns - the first of the sixteen columns of the Grand Mosque rose on the other side of a fallen, debris-covered minaret. Turning south, he found a giant pillar tomb that rose to the canopy and carried it higher to a heavenly break in emerald air near its peak.

The blade of the machete tore through the jungle like a giant devil's fang as Turkazim became driven by an evil power. Weather-cratered stone walls towered over him as he worked his way through the tombs. Clouds of multicolored birds were stirred up, and they announced the coming of an evil spirit to all of Keti.

A ghost trail came into view, and a few final slashes gave him access to it. Much of the jungle had been cleared here, and that meant he had to be near the prison. He went swiftly down the trail, slowing only to climb over a collapsed segment of an ancient conduit system.

The prison came into view, and it wasn't nearly as tall as the tombs; heaps of man-sized stones made up the decaying structure. Sections of it poked out of dense jungle, and in places, plants and trees grew right out of the collapsing stone. Six small pillars supported an open-air gallery at the prison's main entrance. In the old days, it was a place of slave auctions, but now it was set up as living quarters, with the jungle cleared except where it thatched the broken roof.

Turkazim walked up boldly and sat by a slab-of-stone table. Bones littered the table, the cups and dishes were glazed earthenware and porcelain, and there were stoneware jugs here and there on the cracked granite floor. Birds fluttered in the wash of emerald light around a well he hadn't noticed on his approach.

It wasn't long before a man emerged from the jungle - black and very stocky with a huge, well-rounded head. He wore a loincloth and had an intelligent but ugly face. Turkazim was sharpening his machete; he looked up, taking note of the man's flat nose and wide red eyes.

Though unarmed, the man was unafraid. He walked up, his stride very strong, and sat across from Turkazim. "Why are you here?" he said in Swahili.

"There's only one thing I could be here for, Guardian of Keti, and that's the Rahilla."

"You have the sacred seal of the demon king?"

Turkazim took a square plate of gold from his pack. The image of a skull was beaten into it. A white substance formed the bone, the eyes were silver, and red-and-yellow birds peeked out from the nose holes.

"Heed this warning. If you have brought a false seal, the Rahilla will devour you."

Turkazim took the chain and collar from his pack. "Bring me the Rahilla," he said as he poured the chain on the table.

In silence, the Guardian of Keti took the seal and chain and entered the dark prison, heading for the catacombs that were the home of the Rahilla.

Turkazim rested, calmly sharpening his machete, the jungle around him a still life, and he wasn't moved when furious half-human howling suddenly echoed up from the bowels of the earth. He continued to work on the blade until it was sharp enough to cut his finger without feeling it, and then he sheathed it.

As the Guardian and the Rahilla grew closer, the howls grew less threatening, the sound skirling up into the jungle canopy. Turkazim pictured a lunatic ape with the vocal cords of a hyena. When they emerged in the light, the Rahilla was almost silent, huffing and snorting just enough to let the world be warned. It walked beside the Guardian, bent over like a gorilla, though its stoop seemed more the effect of confinement. The Rahilla was more human than ape. It was a male with a smooth brown hide, three-toed feet, a wild growth of red hair on its head, and small ears. Its face would've been human if it weren't for the all-black slanted eyes, ring-like exposed nostrils, and sharp teeth. It exuded an aura of intelligence that was both humanlike and terrifying.

No man could fight a creature with the hard musculature of the Rahilla, but Turkazim stood and faced it unafraid. He held out his hand, and the Guardian passed him the chain. Once the chain had been transferred, the Rahilla looked into Turkazim's eyes for a tense moment, then moved obediently to his side.

"It is done," the Guardian said.

"Not yet," Turkazim said. "I still need the burial skull of Tukoraka."

"I have no such skull."

Turkazim calmly placed the chain on the table and drew his machete. He swung it and, with a swift, liquid stroke, cut the man's head off. A puff of mist appeared as the body withered to a pile of vines. The head had fallen and rolled to Turkazim's feet. He scooped it up and cradled it in his right palm. The eyes transformed to pure silver; the dead Guardian's face firmed to the classic look of a statue.

"Unfortunately for you, your skull is the burial skull of Tukoraka," Turkazim said. Grinning, he sat at the table with the Rahilla and took his headhunter kit from his pack. He planned to enjoy a peaceful hour dressing the skull.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: TERMINAL

The terminal building was the sort of place that could trigger agoraphobia. It was big enough to be a hangar itself, with a metal framework like the ribs of a robot dinosaur. Beyond immense sheets of frosted glass, the morning sun floated in the sky like the king of all naked light bulbs. Turkazim had a scowl glued on his face as he watched a floor machine leave a trail of brilliance over by the ticket counter. The Rahilla sat beside him quietly, nodding his head and shock of red hair to a beat nobody else could hear. The man-beast looked like an offbeat guy you might see at the airport. Turkazim had shaved him and disguised him in cool sneakers, wraparound sunglasses, and a baggy suit, the jacket open to reveal a Touch-Me-and-Die T-shirt.

A signal from the clerk erased the scowl from Turkazim's face, and he gestured for the Rahilla to remain seated as he went to check the tickets. He was supposed to be using church planes on this leg of the journey, but a foul-up had left him at the mercy of the public airlines. Randal was behind it, and Turkazim was almost certain of it.

The ticket guy was a skinny white boy. "There's been a cancellation," he said. "Thought I could do you guys a favor, especially your boss. I'm one of his biggest fans. He rolls out the vocals with genius, and his lyrics are always the best. Nobody else can even touch him."

Turkazim looked at the clerk's pimply teenage face, wondering what in the hell he was talking about. As he took out his Ether's credit card, it struck him that the clerk thought the Rahilla was a music star of some sort and that his disguise had worked fabulously. "I'm his manager," he said. "You should see what he does when he's on the loose and dancing. I was all over Africa with him. He's got one hell of a show."

"Africa. Wow! That must've been somethin'."

"It was, it was," Turkazim said, hitting the kid with more small talk before shuffling away with his tickets.

"That's Gate 11 at 8:05," the clerk hollered.

With an hour to kill, Turkazim took the Rahilla to the Brass Lamp bar and picked a table by the window so he could keep an eye on the terminal crowd. He ordered a double Captain Morgan for himself and a glass of water for the Rahilla. Although he hated public airlines, things were going so well that it was amazing. No one took the Rahilla for anything more than a big oddball, and the large doses of tranquilizers he was feeding him were working beautifully.

A clumsy white waiter slammed his rum on the table, spilling some of it, and Turkazim clenched his teeth and forced his hands under the table to keep from slugging him. The Rahilla growled, and the waiter backed away. Taking a sip, Turkazim wondered if Lana had managed to pick up the burial skull he'd sent.

Murky weather hung over Toronto like a lid on a cauldron. Garth considered the advantages of Tibet, then he shrugged the feeling off as the plane landed. It was only a brief stop anyway. Soon he'd be off to Cutucu to meet the others. Victory was now in sight and he could see a supernatural future. It was power in his breast, a feeling like blood transforming to holy light.

A customs agent turned off the metal detector as Garth passed through so the sacred dagger wouldn't trigger the alarm. He strode on confidently and didn't expect anyone to recognize him. He was dressed in sandals, faded jeans, and a

hip-length embroidered shirt, looking more like a 1969 flower child than a priest.

Scanning the crowd ahead, he noted that he'd been spotted. Lana was approaching from the left, and Dave Marley was coming from the right. The terminal was aglow like a fluorescent heaven, heightening the urgency on their faces.

Marley reached him first, snapping photos with his phone with one hand as he approached. Garth halted, and his ego suddenly got the better of him. Answering a few questions for Marley wouldn't hurt.

"I'm still with Crystal Millennium, and we'd like to know where Melanie is hiding?"

"She's not hiding," Garth said. "She's working, coordinating church affairs in South America."

"I don't understand. The church is throwing a festival of the ethers with guests from all over the world, yet no one of top importance is at the helm at the Rama Temple?"

"Lana is at the helm," Garth said, nodding to her. "People in the ecumenical body are of equal importance."

"I have something to show you," Marley said. He opened his bag and produced a human jawbone. "I dug this up at your Northern monastery. Any comments?"

Garth grinned uncomfortably, and Lana's chest expanded, making her breastplate look like it was about to explode. "It's a prank. A sick individual put it there."

Marley put the bag down and reached to the bottom, coming up with a skull. A burial skull with jet eyes, an ivory mouth, and two jeweled birds in the nose holes. "The gems are real," he said. "A customs worker here at the airport gave it to me. He was ordered to pass it through to the priesthood at the Rama Temple, but he decided to come clean about it and go to the press." Marley looked from Lana to Garth with the measured contempt of a TV talk show host on his face. When he judged their faces pale enough, he dropped his bombshell. He took a silk handkerchief from his jacket pocket and put the skull away, then he unfolded the cloth and took out a lock of hair attached to a piece of raw scalp. "This was with the skull, and it indicates that it belongs to a person recently deceased. Something rotten is behind the scenes here, and maybe it's the reason everyone is hiding."

"All right, you have us," Lana said, feigning a look of innocent distress. "Something has been going on. Something supernatural. We are all in danger. Perhaps you should come with us? Maybe you can help."

"I'm an expert when it comes to the supernatural," Marley said. "I'm sure I can help."

"I have to pick up my bags," Garth said. "Customs people have them. I want to show you something I brought back."

"Let's get to it," Marley said.

They cut through the flow of the crowd in single file, then walked abreast on the empty floor leading to the customs office. Out front of the office, a male clerk had a suitcase open and was carefully inspecting a blushing woman's underwear. The clerk glanced at Garth and waved him around the corner.

Rounding the corner, they entered a storage cul-de-sac, empty except for Garth's flight bags. Marley became suspicious immediately. A fast shadow caught his eye; it was moving along a high link fence that composed the north wall of the storage alley. He heard a faint sound like a puff on a small woodwind, and being from Africa, he recognized it as the sound of a blowgun. He tensed and felt a pinprick in his arm. Looking down, he saw a yellow feather embedded above his wrist.

"Oh no, you've poisoned me!" he said, then he snatched at the dart, knocking it to the floor. He fell to his knees.

Garth remained silent and picked up his bags. Lana scooped up the dart. She dropped it in Marley's bag, then took it and his phone and followed Garth around the corner.

Marley saw double, then the scenery spun, and he dropped to an uglier world. Walls pulsed like diseased flesh. Black blood began to shower down like rain, and he remained on his knees, unable to rise. Tremors ran through him, and he began to shake his fists and moan.

"I think that guy around the corner is on drugs," Garth said to the customs clerk as he passed.

Marley's moaning grew louder, growing strange. Customs and security people rushed to him. Garth and Lana passed through a group of businessmen coming out of Gate 8. Some heads turned, but not toward the commotion; instead, they watched silky-haired Lana in her short black dress as she went up the escalator.

It had dark skin and black hair, and was adorned with yellow feathers. A piece of rope ringed its nose and mouth. Its emanations were vile as it was the work of a witch doctor of rare power. He had used power objects to capture the soul of the man he'd killed, and it lived on in the shrunken head. This was the head of an unspeakably evil man. Melanie touched the dry husk remaining of his mind and felt heat, deadness, and wicked thoughts like crisscrossed lightning. With this head, an unsuspecting person wouldn't hear evil voices or wake up screaming from nightmares. The power of possession was clean, and the individual would never know the murderous intentions weren't his own.

Melanie tossed the head to Averam, and he fastened it to his belt. Then she looked to the Shuar witch doctor. His eyes laughed behind blue rings of paint as he held out his hands to receive the head-sized sphere of rose quartz Melanie had offered him as payment. A priest put the sphere in the witch doctor's palms, and he held it greedily, his eyes turning to the color of the quartz as he stared at it.

"Let's get moving," Melanie said. "We haven't got much time to prepare the site." She signaled the other seven priests, and they shouldered their packs. Her three attending priestesses didn't have to carry a load; they moved up beside her and waited as Averam gave orders in Spanish to the Shuar guides.

At first, the guides were reluctant to move, but fear of Averam won them over, and they moved ahead onto the swaying cable bridge. A glimpse of the sheer drop the bridge spanned gave Averam a good feeling, but the sight of the guides jabbering as they walked ruined it. He hated the native guides; they were afraid of their own witch doctor, afraid of anything that might be magic, and when spooked, they might stab you in the back and run.

Averam walked alone, just ahead of Melanie and her priestesses. The pack-bearing priests took up the rear. Averam and the priests wore khaki trousers, red headbands, and thick shirts, while the priestesses wore sandals and short blue dresses, as if they were out for a walk in the city. The shirtless guides seemed to be more in tune with the priestesses.

Unearthly euphoria filled Melanie's mind, radiating to her from colossal crystal clusters in a distant jungle place. Strong wind rushed in the forest canopy like the body of an unknown being, and she saw the faces of returning gods in the mists on the trails. She could hear her own voice singing with the music of victory in the sacred place. A melody left no spirit untouched as death rose reborn. Victory belonged to the supernatural, to the past, and to the great powers of evil. The story would know completion, and all would begin and end at the feet of the idol king.

An emerald tunnel ascended in serpentine twists like a leafy whirlwind. The air was moist, heavy, and drifting with the sweetness of fallen fruit. The guides were now well ahead, clearing a treacherous trail with their machetes. Passage was slow; there was no easy route through the uphill maze of rocky trails. Averam spent much time testing the logs the guides had thrown across patches of mud. And he spent even more time cursing Melanie for using powers of levitation in aid of herself and the priestesses while leaving the rest of them in the slop.

Sunset approached as the trail broke at a clearing. A lean-to made of woven palm leaves stood at its center, and the guides were ahead, weaving a branch frame for another larger lean-to. Packs were dropped, and the priests and priestesses sat, resting in the shade at the edge of the clearing. Melanie and Averam strolled over to inspect the work. A breeze dried the sweat on their brows, and palm leaves rushed gently as they lifted and fell on the branch frame.

"It'll do for tonight," Melanie said.

"Looks like we have company," Averam said.

Across the clearing, a witch doctor was emerging from the jungle. Bright feathers crowned his head, and he wore necklaces of animal teeth and semi-precious stones. He approached the native guides, and they dropped their work and stepped back, keeping a gulf of fear between them and his black magic.

"These evil people are here to rob sacred graves," he said in Spanish. "You are forbidden to work for them."

Averam stepped up quickly. "We have strong magic," he said to the guides. "Obey this fool, and you will be cursed."

"Which of you has the strong magic?" the witch doctor said.

Melanie's teeth were clenched, and she was visibly angry. "I have the strong magic," she said.

"We will see whose magic rules here in the jungle."

Deep silence followed, and as the natives trembled, the witch doctor huffed up his chest, put on his mightiest pose, and faced Melanie. He took a rawhide string with a moonstone attached from around his neck, spun it like a sling, and let it fly. It struck a strangler vine hanging from a tree at the edge of the clearing, knocking it down. The stone and vine fell to the grass, and a moment later, a huge black-and-brown bushmaster serpent reared up and faced them. It had one eye, which was the moonstone.

As the snake slithered toward Melanie, she took off one of her necklaces: a silver chain with a chunk of tiger's-eye quartz. She spun the necklace and tossed it in the grass in front of the snake. A tiger rose up, roared with frightening ferocity, leaped, and cut the rearing snake down. The tiger worried at the flailing snake until it was torn in half, then it broke away and charged the stunned witch doctor. As the tiger pounced, the witch doctor tossed a handful of sparkling powder and dived into the grass. A burst of flames came from the powder, but it failed to stop the tiger. Scorched and smoking, it turned and bounded into him. A knife blade flashed, and the wounded tiger growled and mauled him fiercely, leaving him in a state of blank-eyed shock.

Content with its prize, the tiger dragged the witch doctor by the shoulder and backed into the jungle. The guides' eyes were big with terror and sunset reflections. There was no question of their obedience now. They turned to the beautiful white woman and yielded their primitive souls to her.

"What a heat score," Turkazim thought as he watched the man in front of him shuffle along dumbly. The guy had long, greasy hair, mirror shades, a biker's jacket, and a habit of glancing around like a paranoid addict. As they approached the second metal detector, Turkazim spotted several plainclothesmen and began to sweat bullets, thinking they'd noticed that the Rahilla wasn't an ordinary guy or had caught up with his phony passports. He was sure it was a tight situation. Escape plans took shape in his mind.

Two undercover men moved up on either side of the line, and Turkazim feared the Rahilla would get spooked and rip one of them apart. He stared ahead with a face of stone, prepared to grab the beast if it made any moves toward the closest man - then the trouble began. He seized the startled Rahilla as the undercover men rushed the guy in front of them. One cop put a gun to the guy's head. "Take your hands out of your pockets slowly, or you're dead," he said.

As Turkazim stood back with a tight grip on the Rahilla, plainclothesmen ringed the guy, and one of them unzipped his jacket, snatching out a Uzi machine gun. Then there was muscle all over the guy as he was cuffed, brutally searched, and dragged away.

Things returned to normal quickly; there were no announcements other than the usual gate and departure reports, and they managed to board the plane without further incident. But more trouble came with the seating; the Rahilla shook and started to growl at the window. Turkazim quickly clamped a hand over his mouth and forced him to sit down, then he took two handkerchiefs out of his pack and blindfolded him.

"He's a nervous guy," Turkazim said to a gray-haired lady who had turned to look.

Time passed with the Rahilla appearing to drift into quiet sleep and Turkazim reading an in-flight magazine. The plane was about to taxi off. A stewardess rattled a beverage container that'd been left up by the restroom at the forward end of the cabin. She moved toward the rear with the container, and when she reached the Rahilla, she stared at the blindfold, stumbled, and sloshed some cold water on his lap.

The Rahilla awoke as if from a nightmare, jumped to its feet, and roared. Other passengers gasped, screamed, and tried to duck out of the way, as the Rahilla leaped over the seats like an ape and made for the front of the cabin. Turkazim fell over the seats as he tried to grab the Rahilla, and then, from his knees, he seized the stewardess. "Get the people off the plane!" he shouted. "This is a wild beast!"

"Take me to the pilot," the stewardess choked.

"Okay, follow me to the front. I'm his trainer. I'll keep him back."

They pressed through as panicked people flooded to the rear, and Turkazim waited while she went in and spoke to the pilots. She reappeared from the cabin just as the Rahilla tore a seat out of its casing and threw it down the aisle.

A minute later, the pilot's voice came over the speakers, "This is an emergency, please remain calm as you disembark from the plane."

It was an announcement that didn't work as the passengers were already panicked and jammed in a tight crowd near an exit door. People were being trampled, and Turkazim felt the same wave of relief they did when a stewardess got through and freed the door. With Turkazim moving between them and the beast, the passengers grew calm enough to start stumbling off the plane in a somewhat orderly fashion. It went more easily as the Rahilla was settling down. The passengers continued to exit, and the beast opened a washroom door, taking an apelike interest in what it saw.

Turkazim turned to take command of the Rahilla. A dopey mood had come over the beast, and he guessed that the tranquilizers were swinging it from high to low. His whole plan had been a mistake. He should have tried something else, but it was too late now. "Much too late," he thought as an armed security man burst into the cabin.

The security man tripped, stumbled across the aisle, and fired a burst of fire into one of the seats. Turkazim charged with devilish speed and stomped the back of his neck, managing to snatch the weapon as he collapsed.

"Get up!" Turkazim said to the groaning man. "Now seal the door! Move it or be buried!"

Fortunately, the guy was alone. The others were elsewhere questioning the would-be hijacker. As the door closed, Turkazim and the Rahilla loomed over him. He had a bulldog face, and he shook at the sight of the beast's exposed fangs.

"Do what I say, or my friend will eat you," Turkazim said. "Come with me. We have to talk to the pilots. Our destination has been changed to the Andes."

Only a man who had lost his senses would tackle the Cutucu jungle alone, and along with his senses, Garth had lost himself long years ago in the bowels of another jungle. He should've been trying to make a safe camp for the coming night, but instead he was climbing higher on the ridge into vegetation that was darker, denser, and wetter.

Branches of stunted trees intertwined and formed moss-draped uphill tunnels. The ground was a pattern of woven roots like the twisted and clutching hands of a thousand-fingered demon. The pattern broke at dark openings to caverns concealed in the forest. He moved in a graceful trance, pulled onto the top of the ridge by the whispering of dreamlike shadows. His soft footfalls, scolding birds, and the occasional crash of forest debris were the only other sounds. Here in Cutucu, parasitic vines climbed ancient trees and grew heavy enough to topple them. Garth felt like a bigger parasite, one toppling a planet.

Melanie and Averam were dim shapes, moving mysteriously like distant clouds. They were at the sacred place, a few kilometers deeper in the jungle. This was a diversion, and whatever had called him off the trail and up the ridge didn't believe it was impossible for a man to survive here against deadly snakes, tarantulas, and night-prowling tigers. It was a demon spirit that believed all must fear it and the power it sent into a man.

Shafts of silvery light lanced through the canopy near the ridge-top. Light as bright as the flashing scythe of the reaper. The last obstacle was a fallen lichen-covered tree trunk as big as a tank truck. He climbed it carefully and reached the summit, looking out over forest-covered valleys and ridges. It was a continuous rise and fall of emerald that looked as rugged above as it did below. But harsh as it was, it looked friendlier than the ice-blue firmament rising forever above it.

As Garth watched, something tumbling appeared out of the depths of the sky. It flashed silver, and it was a plane. Its fuselage had been ripped by turbulence, and Garth could see that the people on board had no chance of survival. It plummeted wildly, heading for the bottom of the ridge, and suddenly the whispering that had been guiding him became clear. As the shattered plane skated toward a tiny clearing, he calculated the quickest route to it, to Turkazim, and to the Rahilla.

They were hit by the booming of a King Kong wind tunnel, and it was a force that left Turkazim barely able to retain consciousness. He was aware of a band of iron around his waist, and then he realized it was the Rahilla dragging him to the back of the passenger cabin. The pilots were already damned, ripped out of their cabin by the Andean turbulence. Pressure tugged at his eyes, and he heard a sound like an incredible scream - the whole of the fuselage was crumpling up as a sardine can, and it wasn't dying quietly, but protesting like a wounded monster.

Up near the front, the security man flew free of the seat he'd been bound in and shot back and forth like he was in a game machine. Then the belly of the plane cracked, a lightning-fork pattern ran across the ceiling, and the man stopped in mid air for half a second before the sudden pressure difference ripped him in half like he was a paper doll and rained him inside out into the sky as a whirling toss of blood and butcher scraps.

Hammers of hell pounded up the belly of the plane as it skidded over the treetops. Turkazim thought his brains were going to be sucked out and end up as slime on the tree limbs, but somehow he was spared and bounced around on a portion of the fuselage that remained intact while the rest of the plane was demolished. A web of vines caught the fuselage, and the remaining hot metal slid into the trees, sending up sheets of flame. Turkazim knelt and found the Rahilla already standing, waiting for him to lead the way out. A big chunk of metal crashed in front of them, and moss-laden boughs poked in. Turkazim pounded his palm against his temple, trying to get the deafening ringing out of his head.

CHAPTER 14: CUTUCU

Sunlight added transparency to the yellow tints in the crown of the green ash, diffusing the air and Jennifer's mind with clear touches of color. She stood up, stretched, and brushed leaf-dust and needles from her dress. She liked it here on the line between the country and the wilderness. In the cities, the crowd ruled, and if the streets were empty, it became a shadow crowd. There was no peace when you had to answer a crowd in your head. Yesterday they'd been in Toronto at the festival of the Ethers, and they'd found nothing but emptiness behind the masks. The show had been put on to cover for something else. Dan was the first to notice it, and so, like Melanie and her chief priests, they had made themselves scarce.

She walked to the edge of the shade and looked at the sand beach dipping to the still surface of the lake. This was the point, and the cliffs here towered above her, eclipsing the sun. It took imagination to picture the depths beneath - 300 feet of rock wall running down to the silt bottom.

A staircase ran up the cliff-side from below the waterline. Carved by Indians a thousand years ago and restored today, the stairs were streaked with red and yellow and looked like a small work of the Great Spirit's chisel. Even gods had flights of fancy back then, before the magic died. Jennifer's own magic had faded years ago when her mother died, but now some of it was returning with Dan. She could see it brightening the works of the ancient Indians, like an inner gold that had again become visible.

She remained still, watching the sun spit fire over the cliff, and after a while, she realized it wasn't the sun anymore. The fire deepened to a fan of turquoise beams, and two men appeared at the top of the cliff staircase. In an instant, she'd turned and was running to the camp.

Her dress fluttered, revealing the fine curves of her thighs as she took a shortcut through a patch of oak, pine, and maple. The cottage chimney came into view, and a moment later, she spotted Dan and Sheila sitting at a picnic table preparing a vegetarian lunch. They saw her and turned as she raced into the clearing. Feeling safe, she stopped just before she reached them. She was out of breath and keenly aware of the shadows.

"Strangers are coming!" she blurted as she caught her breath. "I think it's Randal and someone else."

Dan raised an eyebrow. "Randal, I need to talk to him. Let's go."

Their lunch ended up left as food for birds and chipmunks. Jennifer snatched Dan's arm as they paced across the clearing to the path. Sheila took the lead, and her ability to walk incredibly fast, while her body kept a normal, rhythmic appearance, left Dan and Jennifer half-stumbling into a jog to keep up. Dan knew Jennifer's tight grip wasn't from fear of falling, but because Randal's arrival no doubt meant a new journey into terror. He wasn't much in the mood himself; the constant testing of his nerve was giving him a quiet wish to have been born a coward.

A heap of bone-smooth driftwood marked the end of the path. They emerged on the beach and squinted into the sun, trying to spot the men on the cliff face. Randal and his friend were about halfway down. Dan raised his binoculars for a better look. "It's Randal all right. The man with him looks to be Mexican. He must be a priest, too. They both have Biblical coloring on their robes - gold, blue, purple, and scarlet."

"I don't think a vampire can be a priest," Sheila said.

"Randal doesn't seem to agree," Jennifer said. "This dramatic arrival might be a trick. We'd better be sure he isn't back in league with demons."

"I'll take the boat over alone," Dan said.

The motorboat was tied to a small dock. Dan strolled up, tossed his moccasins aside, and glanced over at Randal. Jennifer leaned on Sheila's shoulder as they watched him start the Mercury engine. Leaving the dock swiftly, he followed a semicircle to the bottom of the cliff steps. Randal was still a ways up, so he drifted there in the lap of his waves, feeling the silent strength of the rock and wondering what reason Randal could have for arriving in such an odd way.

The silence broke suddenly as the root on his belt came to life. Filaments of energy were crackling as they shot from the root to the steps. What had appeared to be streaks of yellow and red paint on the rocks was now luminous energy, and it was his guess that the stairs were aligned with an ancient energy field - natural power the Iroquois Indians must have known about and tapped.

Light and smoke nearly overcame him, then after some moments, his vision cleared, and he moved in closer so Randal and Immanuel could board. Randal's hair was a bit wild, but otherwise, he looked quite normal. He raised a hand in greeting and silently got into the boat. Immanuel followed, then Dan kicked the engine in and rode a trail of foam back to the dock.

"I was looking for you at the Festival of the Ethers. But you'd already left," Randal said.

"The event was a smoke screen; the demons are elsewhere."

"Precisely."

Jennifer and Sheila waited uncomfortably at the dock; they gave Randal and Immanuel sour looks. The sort of looks women might give men they knew had bizarre sexual preferences. As Dan fastened the boat, Randal stepped up to Sheila. She immediately turned her gaze away, refusing to look him in the eye.

"This is my friend Immanuel," Randal said. "He's one of the few priests who still believe in me. But since you women won't look at him, I guess you'll have

to imagine what he looks like.”

Immanuel laughed, his voice ringing musically.

“I still have the root,” Dan said. “They can't lock you into any spell.”

“Okay,” Jennifer said. “Let's talk over there.” She pointed to some beat-up picnic tables.

Dan nodded and gestured for Randal and Immanuel to move on ahead. At the picnic tables, they all sat facing the lake and cliff, which solved the problem of eye contact.

“Immanuel has the same blood disorder as you do. That would be my guess,” Dan said.

“Yes,” Randal said, “but we both have some control over it.”

“Are you seeking revenge because of the curse?” Jennifer said.

“That has to be part of it. The idea of a new world of demon idols, savages, and sacrifices is in opposition to any religious vision I had. I brought in idols when I was high priest, but they were meant as objects for meditation. I didn't think the Children would begin to worship them.”

“So what's going on exactly? How do we stop Melanie?” Sheila said.

“Melanie and her priests have prepared a ceremony to return their demon king to earth. The site is in the Cutucu jungle. That's where we must go to stop them.”

“How can we be of any help?” Dan said. “Your powers are greater than ours.”

“My powers exist because of the demon king's curse. I can't rely on them in a crunch. I need the help of people who haven't been possessed by the evil.”

“Who are you serving in this? Yourself or some new god you've found?”

“People are blind to everything but their little gods. No one is free to see other people's visions clearly, which means they can only condemn their fellow man. I'm serving the part of myself I have lost - my own humanity. I just want to buy a few more years for people to live, love, and die. Then the suffering will be bearable. Stopping Melanie isn't a guarantee of a better future. Men are evil, and they will likely destroy the planet. I have no real answer other than my refusal to accept the rule of evil and the past.”

Len stepped from the trees behind the picnic tables. “The demon will make humans less than human. His rule will be the end of our world. The higher goals of humanity will perish.”

“My reasons are close to yours, Randal,” Dan said. “We are violent beings, and there won't be a decent future world if a malevolent spirit harnesses the evil in men.”

“Let's get to the point,” Sheila said. “What exactly will we be stopping if we go to Cutucu? Do tell us, Randal?”

“The demon king has to pass through a time gate from a jungle in his spirit realm to enter the world in the jungle of Cutucu. It is that particular black magic ceremony we will be stopping.”

"We have to go now," Immanuel said. "Tonight the planets align, and the ceremony will take place."

"That soon," Sheila said. "I didn't bring my rocket ship and parachute. So how are we going to get there?"

"The same way we got here," Randal said. "We'll use the cliff. It has an energy field that makes it a gate to other continents. There are several similar gates. It's the method the ancients used to cross the oceans. When the demon's curse returned me as a vampire, I inherited memories of past magic and other powers. The demon king was so angered by my refusal to serve him that he cursed me without first thinking that the powers of the curse might be used against him. I can't destroy him myself, but I can use my power to provide some protection while you people try to get through and destroy him."

"Our powers are limited," Immanuel said. "It means we haven't much of a chance. If you people come, you'll have to realize that the most likely outcome is that we will simply be killed."

Evening approached, and the sun threw a trail across the lake. Ripples lit by dazzles as bright as sprouting flames. Although the air was hazed with light, it failed to alter the mystic coldness of the cliffs. Randal and Immanuel were climbing the stairs, and from the shore, they looked like bright beetles. Dan returned to the dock feeling grim, like he was Charon ferrying souls over the Styx River. Len shuffled back and forth as he waited, his thoughts a knot of confusion without resolution. Jennifer stood nearby, looking at a vision of a strange jeweled skull in the flame-bright water. Sheila's inability to see beyond the immediate played in her favor. Her head was clear, and she found the idea of climbing the cliff under a beautiful sky exhilarating.

Len felt more drained by the moment, and the water's movement turned the confusion in his head into an ache. He stepped back as Dan glided alongside the dock. His light-headedness amazed him. He knew climbing the cliff would be difficult.

Sheila leaped on board recklessly, rocking the boat. A timorous Jennifer followed. Len stepped on lightly, managing to hide his dizziness from the others.

The cliff towered devilishly high over the approaching boat, arcing above them like a bank of craggy gray clouds. The stairs had lost their aspect of marvelous accomplishment and now resembled mere notches on the cheek of the biggest of stone warriors. Perhaps a notch existed for each boat that had been dashed and devoured by the rocks. If it was a secret that the cliff reached across the world, it wasn't a well-kept secret; it looked to be exactly what it was - a rock that towered over the whole world.

Wavelets lapped at the cliff wall. Dan tossed a loop of rope over a chunk of jutting rock and got out first. He steadied the boat as the others stepped onto the narrow platform, then he gazed up. The stairs rose at an angle and faded into streaks of yellow and red light. Randal and Immanuel were out of sight.

After glancing back to reassure the others, Dan began to climb. A faint breeze sang by like lonely music, and he knew it would be a hazard if it gusted. He noted that the stairs were well cut and not cracked, broken, or chipped in

many places. The streaking wasn't the only pigment; the rock also contained minerals and feldspar.

Len's perspective of the staircase wasn't quite as firm. To him, the streaking resembled markings on the back of a snake, and the breeze was mournful, an oracle warning him not to continue. He didn't look over at the sky or down as he climbed because he knew the view would overwhelm and unbalance him.

As the sun set, the streaked stairs seemed to melt into the sky and water - it was like they were in an immense bowl of brushstroke colors. The only person who saw beyond the dazzles was Jennifer, and she could see a patch of night sky at the top.

Tiny shells were embedded in the rough stone, and Len studied them as he climbed. They were something interesting to focus on. As he pressed on, they began to fill his mind, squeezing out his thoughts until a sudden revelation hit him - each shell formed a tiny face. There were millions of them; totem faces with mouths gaping in laughter, horror and animal hunger. The effect was disturbing, and he was forced to look away to shake the unsettling emotions they conveyed. Halting, he looked out at the sky and was overwhelmed. The chasm he saw was so big and brilliant that he thought he was going to be sucked off the stairs. His knees shook, and as he tried to steady himself, a man appeared. The man wore feathers and buckskin and had the painted face of an Indian shaman. He offered Len his hand as though to help him up. Len reached for it, then, in a nick of time, he froze. The shaman was standing in mid-air. Stepping in his direction would mean a long fall. He shook his head, and the shaman disappeared. Then he took a deep breath and continued up, keeping his eyes on his hands and feet and away from the shells.

Gradually, the northern lakes and forests became like a flat quilt seen through cloudy glass. Sunset faded on the landscape like color paling on a canvas. A crystal skull appeared in Jennifer's mind. Darkness and a swirl of stardust were above. Lumps of rock like fists marred the cliff, which was old and corroded in its higher portions. Randal and Immanuel were visible now, their robes fluttering as they climbed into a ribbon of night.

Moments later, all of them were over the top and in darkness that moved in blinding patches like fog. Each moment of blindness was followed by a rush of brilliance as star dust swirled in, striking their eyes with an aurora of fire. Earth's energy charged their bodies, and they could feel it stitching the world together.

They came out of it to find they had traveled through time and space and were now in the late afternoon, on a trail descending from the top of the cliff. Mossy tree trunks as thick as castle keeps, orchids, and pools of clear water were here and there in the undergrowth. Green-and-bronze hummingbirds darted in flowering bushes and higher up in the canopy, wrens, puffbirds, and warblers sang a return chorus to hidden frogs that chirped and trilled.

They remained silent as crossing the world by the earth gate had left them too amazed to speak. Shining beads of water, scattered like silver moats in shafts of gold-tinted light, seemed to embody the magic. The moss-draped jungle had a depth of enchantment that put evil out of mind. Transparent wings of fluttering butterflies completed the spell.

Dan walked ahead of the others. He took a breath of fruit-rich air and scanned the foliage as he waited for them to catch up. He could see Randal and Immanuel pacing slowly, avoiding slicks of mud. Their colorful robes seemed made for Cutucu and a jungle god.

Len moved spryly down a small, steep, rocky trail and stood with Dan, watching the women descend. The pallor of illness had left his face, and it was now rosy from exertion and the soft sunlight filtering through the canopy. The jungle air brushed him like a flowing being. A moody spirit with mysterious intentions, it could swing a mind to ecstasy, murder, or terror. It had that feeling of extremes.

Like puppets, Jennifer and Sheila popped under and up from a skirt of low-hanging moss. A shaft of light painted their faces orange-gold.

"What do we do for light when night falls?" Sheila said.

"Randal said he would supply light," Dan said.

They turned and looked down the darkening trail, trying to locate Randal. Immanuel stood on a log in the fading light; he waved them on, and they moved down a slide-steep incline of hard-packed mud to a spot where a fallen log lay like a beached whale across a pond of dark-black silt. Dan leaped up on the log and got a good footing before he boosted the others. They took careful steps over the moss-bearded surface, knowing that a fall meant snake-teeming quicksand.

Immanuel leaped off the end of the log as they approached, and they continued walking like they had jugs on their heads until they were clear of the gossamer curtains of moss hanging over the mud. One by one, they jumped down and went to a boulder where Randal and Immanuel were sitting. The trail here was much wider, freshly cut by a team of guides.

"What do you have for a light?" Dan said to Randal.

Randal nodded to Immanuel, and he reached into his robe and took out a cloudy, oval crystal. He moved his fingers over it, and it began to glow bright like a frosted light bulb. "This is a special light that repels tigers and harmful creatures," Immanuel said.

"How much farther?" Len said.

"A little more than a kilometer," Randal said, "and over a hill. The trail is flat and dry from here on."

A full disc of moon drifted in a bank of blue-green haze, and the jungle greenery transformed to a tunnel of shifting forms. Foliage and moss trapped moonlight, looking like layers of membrane and green, waxy blades. Immanuel's crystal created an orb of light that surrounded them like a crystal ball as they moved down the center of the smooth black trail. Black magic was the spirit of the night, and it leaked into their minds. Visions of monsters flashed before Len's eyes, and he knew that this part of the jungle was the oldest and vilest burial ground on earth. The demon king's gate wasn't here without reason.

Immanuel dimmed his crystal, and the walls of darkness closed around them. A phosphor afterimage threw glittering shards of ghost metal and evil eyes across the trees and bushes. They were climbing a hill, dark mounds like

crouching bears were everywhere at the edge of the light. A pattern of light filled the sky at the top.

When they were near the crest, Immanuel turned right and walked between two mounds. He halted when he saw that only Randal wanted to follow him off the trail.

"What's the problem?" Immanuel said in a near whisper.

Jennifer pointed to the base of a mound near his feet. He looked down and saw a skeletal hand poking out of the earth and grass; it was so old it was petrified and partially encased in stone.

"Don't worry about that," Immanuel said. "That guy hasn't grabbed anyone since the Stone Age."

Progress was slow as they went off the trail and wound through the mounds, avoiding stretches heavy with vines, thorns, and scrub. The sight of tarantulas skittering at the top of a mound forced a gasp from Sheila; she shook like jelly and squeezed Jennifer's arm so hard she had to muffle a cry of pain. Covering her eyes, Sheila let Jennifer pull her on as they climbed a patch of open sand to the enormous trees on the hilltop.

At the top, they stood like dwarves on exposed tree roots that were as big as logs, and they looked down on a vista so fantastic it left them breathless. The moon hung like a paper lantern over a depression resembling a jeweled box. Reflected light formed tracery in the sky, and a number of small fires were burning in stumps, filling the air with the perfume of wood. A structure similar to Stonehenge stood at the center of the bowl, only it was smaller, and the stones were made of red jasper run through with black streaks. It had a solstice walk of lapis lazuli, and tonight it faced the visibly aligned planets, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter in the clear sky beyond the moon and the tracery.

A priest robed in vermilion was kneeling at the end of the walk, and his chant was barely audible. The deep ring of a gong drew their attention, and they saw a black-robed priest silence the vibration with his hand and strike it again softly. The copper gong stood on a painted stump and was surrounded by obelisks of jade and monument stones of carnelian feldspar. From the hilltop, they could see that the monument stones formed a cabalistic cross facing the heavens. A cluster of ten-foot-tall crystals glowed behind the stonehenge. Beside it, a purple-robed priestess began beating a stump with what looked like wooden tongues; the stump was carved in the image of a feather-ornamented warrior and sounded like a drum. Several priests and priestesses were moving in an area of long grass surrounding an obelisk of onyx. A naked beast was chained to spikes driven into the obelisk, and a wide circle had been drawn around it with phosphor that glowed like flames.

"It makes the temples I built look cheap," Randal said.

"There's so much going on down there," Len said. "We've got to get close enough to see who is who."

"Randal and I will work our way to the far side," Immanuel said. "Don't let them spot you. We don't want to do anything before they're locked into the ceremony."

Randal and Immanuel walked off silently, following the big trees on the hilltop as they moved around the depression. Dan studied the hillside, looking for the

easiest way down. There were some grassy areas, but they were alive with light, so he decided to keep near the bushes. Even without fire, there would have been enough bright light for movement. The path he selected would take them close to the monument stones and obelisks, which was the area with the least light and the most cover. He was about to get moving when a terrible high-pitched cry skirled up in the night air.

"It's the ape beast," Jennifer said. "It doesn't enjoy being chained."

"I'm glad it's chained," Dan said. "It saves us worrying about being surprised by it."

The Rahilla continued its anguished cries as it took careful steps down the hillside, and some of its cries reached an intensity that threatened to shatter crystal. They were moving against a blaze of razor-edged light that reflected up like splinters of silver and pooled in the eyes with a hypnotic dazzle. The moon swam in haze above the shifting tracery, taking on a gemlike appearance, its face shifting from garnet green to topaz blue.

"This light has a feel like electricity," Len said as he paused partway down the hill.

"I can feel it crawling on my skin," Sheila said.

Dan kept silent and pressed on, feeling a tickle in his nostrils from smoky air blowing through the flowering bushes. The drumming grew louder, and Jennifer felt long vibrations penetrating her bones and running in her blood. It was like a base invader hammering unclean blows right into her flesh. She stole a glance through a gash in the wall of brush and saw past some monolithic stones to the distant drummer ... an albino priestess, arms flying as she manipulated the tongues of wood.

A leveling of the earth near the cleared edge of the ceremony grounds made for fewer bushes and thorns, but there were some stunted trees, vine mats, and fernlike plants with standing leaves like sword blades that made a jagged, gnarled, and webbed fencing. Dan took a position by one of the trees and was looking toward the Rahilla when Jennifer dug her peach nails into his shoulder.

"There's something moving, farther down near the beast," she whispered. "I see a dim image in my mind, something human."

"Let's fan back to the bushes and see if anything shows."

Jennifer stayed glued to Dan, and Sheila and Len moved to either side of them. There was a good overhang of spongy bushes that shielded them with shadow. Waiting turned out to be difficult. Sheila found her eyes continually drifting to the aligned planets. Len found the Rahilla's cries unnerving, Dan's awareness was dominated by the drumming and the pulse of Jennifer's breasts against his side, and Jennifer saw too many images in the smoke to be able to make out a real beast.

Time stood as still as the silvery pools of rainwater deep in the jungle. Like a bloodstain seeping into cotton, a form began to darken the smoke and haze beyond the trees. It was a lumbering creature, shaped like a large man, and its movements were quiet but awkward. Its clumsy gait was out of sync with the drumming, and soon it was passing near the tree they had just left. Steps beyond the tree it turned, parted a mass of leaves and vines, and stepped among some exposed tree roots. A wash of flickering light illumined its

maggoty body, revealing a broad frame hung with slimy earth, roots, and rotten flesh. Obviously, it had never been human but was some sort of ogre. It lifted a patchy face of rot, whisker tufts, and sores to the moon, then it reached up with slime-slick hands and seized a gnarled branch.

Dan peeled Jennifer from him, reached over, and sliced through a rope of vine with his hunting knife. He continued to work on the vine as the creature tore a branch from the tree. Twigs, bark bits showered down, and the ogre staggered back holding the branch clumsily.

Len picked up on Dan's plan. He waited for Dan's signal, then moved out of the shadows and confronted the ogre with a look of put-on bravery. Its eyes immediately went from dull black to luminous yellow, and it took a swipe at Len with the branch. Len stepped back, scooped up a stone, and hurled it into the beast's chest. It moaned through reedy vocal cords and lumbered forward, brandishing the branch like an ax. Before it could strike, again Dan slipped out behind it, tossed a loop of vine over its head, and dug in his heels for a hard pull. The vine closed on the ogre's neck; there was a crunch like rotten wood being crushed. It keeled over backward, crashing to the ground with the branch.

On the ground, its movements became molasses-slow, as if it were asleep and dreaming. Dan moved quickly to tie its feet and legs while Sheila cut some vines for its arms. She handed Dan the vines and looked on morbidly with Len and Jennifer as he finished binding the creature. The maggots crawling on the creature's flesh made them reluctant to help, and more than once, Dan cursed and brushed rotten earth from his hands.

"I read somewhere that ogres can sleep for a thousand years, so a knockout should be good for at least a hundred," Dan said as he led them through a carpet of vines at the perimeter of the cleared area.

Once they were in the long grass, they kept low and ran behind the first monument stone. It wasn't large enough to provide cover for four, so Len and Sheila moved off to another stone. They ducked out of sight and watched a small procession move into the stones, headed for the priest with the gong. Averam walked in the lead, wearing a belted turquoise robe with a shrunken head dangling at the hip. The long, flattened grass was also turquoise; an effect of moonlight, and it gave Averam an unreal aspect. Several black-robed priests and priestesses followed at his heels. One of them was the black man Dan had slugged at the Rama Temple. The others he didn't recognize.

The procession remained slow and somber even though the fires were blazing and the drums pounded steadily on. Averam and his people didn't look around but walked in a trance to a circular area near the gong.

Averam entered the circle, but the others stopped at the perimeter. A mosaic of inlaid stones made up the disk and likely formed a larger image. All they could see from a distance was a blur of color. At the center of the circle, Averam stopped and took an object from his robe. It was a piece of stone; silvery moonlight flashed from it as he leaned over and placed it into the pattern.

Booming thunder hammered Len; Sheila saw a bright light; a pulse of fire whooshed past Jennifer; and Dan felt a wind of energy. Len fell hard against

the stone, Sheila and Jennifer went tumbling in the grass, and Dan was frozen in place as the root on his belt sent a green snake of energy into the ground.

Sheila rolled up unharmed and saw that Averam and his people were still at the circle and absorbed in the ceremony. She gathered that Averam had released some type of energy with the key stone, so she helped Len up, and they looked over and saw Dan walking to Jennifer. She was on her knees in the grass. A wall of bright haze rose behind her. The wall circled the entire place of ceremony, leaving the jungle locked outside.

"We're caught in some sort of force field," Sheila said.

Len examined a nasty scrape on his arm. "This place has been locked into ceremonial time. No other world or life exists for any of us until the outcome of the ceremony decides where we belong."

It wasn't apparent whether Randal and Immanuel were inside, outside, or destroyed by the force, so they could do little but wait and see how things developed. Dan was already back behind the monument stone, watching Averam, and a somewhat ruffled Jennifer was beside him. She smiled weakly at Len and Sheila, then they, too, turned back to Averam.

Averam had priests and priestesses sprinkling gold powder around the perimeter of the mosaic circle while he knelt at the center, eyes closed, with a slightly hypocritical expression on his face. The priests and priestesses stepped inside the circle when they were finished, and Averam stood up, took out a skin of dust, and began to sprinkle out a small silver circle within the larger circle. The circle was to contain him only.

Again, Averam kneeled at the center, and while his eyes were closed, the priests and priestesses arranged themselves so they were evenly spaced in a circle around him. After some moments of silent blasphemous prayer, he rose, raised a hand, and brought it down. The gong began to sound; it sounded seven times, and when it fell silent, the drumming ceased. Only the sound of crackling fires remained.

Averam then swept his arms open and spoke to the sky. "Oh, Khentamentiu, we request your gifts of power. Accept this libation. Let us betray our Messiah in blood to the ancient man-beast as an offering in return for your blessing."

Reverently, Averam lowered his head, took a silver bottle from his robe, removed the stopper, and poured syrup of blood and honey on the stones.

As the last drop of red liquid fell, a dry, dead voice rattled in the sky. "I accept your offering and bid you go forth and fulfill your duty to my master, Tukoraka."

Averam bowed, and as he did, light and shadow began to rush around the larger circle, making him a blur. The strange whirlwind gathered speed, then slowed like a wheel about to cast an illusion of reverse spin. It did reverse, and it brightened, shattered like glass, and became a whirl of jagged edges.

At that moment, a long-haired priest became dizzy by the effect and unwittingly stepped back, putting a foot outside the magic circle. Cutting edges struck like a swarm of angry bees, sending a small spray of skin, blood, and bone into the grass, then a skeletal hand appeared from nowhere, seized him by the thigh, and pulled him all of the way out. He fell, screamed in shock, and got to his knees as dark skull-shaped forms descended on him and cut into

him, showering out a fountain of light splinters and blooms of red. The evil elementals flew off, and only the face of the failed priest remained. It floated in the air like a ghostly mask. Terror shifted into an expression as it expanded out of shape and condensed into cold dew on the grass.

All fell silent around the circle, and the jeweled night again became dominant. Averam stroked the dull hair on his shrunken head, and his eyes and those of his followers glossed to a new state of trance. They appeared to act with one mind, breaking up the circle and forming a procession that moved slowly through the obelisks toward the Rahilla.

As soon as their backs were to him, Dan led Jennifer through the grass to Len and Sheila. Sheila's eyes were elsewhere; she glanced at them and tossed her head, meaning for them to look with her across the field in the direction of the giant crystal cluster. There in the distance they saw another small procession, moving past a fire toward the Rahilla.

"According to what Averam said, they're going to sacrifice Melanie and feed her to the man-beast," Dan said.

"In that case, we'll save Melanie and nullify the ceremony," Len said.

"Uh-oh," Sheila said. "Look over there at the stonehenge."

A silver arch had appeared at the end of the walk running out of the stonehenge. The brightness of the moon and the aligned planets was beyond it, and the walkway seemed to continue their light's path. A curtain of blue and silver light flashed in the arch; it moved as though breeze-blown, then it parted, and Garth emerged. Dressed in vermilion robes, he carried a skull against his chest and a gleaming dagger in his left hand. If he had arrived from some astral world, he looked the part and more as his face resembled polished stone. As he moved down the walkway, two sword-bearing priests came out of the shadows and walked to either side of him in the grass. He strode into the stonehenge, and the priests turned back and stationed themselves at the arch entrance.

"I'm going to take Jennifer and go over and watch," Dan said to Len. "You take Sheila and follow Averam. Keep an eye out for Randal and Immanuel. If you see a good opportunity for spoiling the ceremony, use it. Otherwise, stay out of sight and let me try something."

"Sure thing," Len said, "but watch yourself over there."

A zigzag row of bright stump fires provided smoky cover for Dan and Jennifer as they approached the moonlit red-and-black jasper of the sacred stonehenge. They moved slowly and warily, looking for anything evil that might be awakening in the grass, stones, or sky. The fire and smoke thinned to rising wisps, and they moved in behind a big slab of volcanic rock. Another slab stood close to the stonehenge and it was as close as they would be able to get and still remain out of sight. They waited a moment, then they moved to it quickly.

Uplifted crossed swords blocked the walkway entrance as Garth's attending priests remained on guard. Garth himself was at the center, kneeling with the skull, looking into its jet eyes. A glow came from the ivory mouth and the jeweled birds in its nostrils.

Garth set the skull down and rose, raising the dagger to the moon for a moment before he swung it to the south. A shimmering band of violet light appeared at the south curve of the stonehenge. Flaring, it picked up intensity, gaining yellow fire that shifted and blazed as two huge horns.

Again, Garth lifted the dagger to the moon. He swept it to the north, giving birth to a pillar of scarlet fire that shrank and became a huge flaming claw.

A reflection of flames from a stump fire danced on the surface of the onyx obelisk and joined with the moonlight glowing on the Rahilla's sweaty hide. Its pure black eyes didn't reveal its anger, but the manner in which its lips curled over its sharp teeth did. The patch of wild red hair at the top of its head and its swollen genitals gave it the appearance of a bestial satyr. One aroused by a need to devour.

Sheila peeked around a stone and got a closer look at the beast. Its black eyes seemed to be looking right at her, and its nostrils flared like it might be getting her scent. She glanced over to Melanie, seeing that her wrists were bound and she wore a green dress that slightly resembled a vestment. She'd been positioned at the center of the evil congregation. Her face was white and expressionless with shock. No doubt the loss of her powers had been devastating, perhaps not as devastating as the fact that she'd worked hard, unwittingly preparing for her own evil end.

Len tugged at her arm, and Sheila saw a priest emerging from a cloud of smoke. They edged around the stone to keep out of his sight. Turkazim had arrived, dressed in dark vestments, and as he approached, Averam joined the congregation, giving him charge of the ceremony. Turkazim walked boldly to the front, took a brief look at the Rahilla, and then walked back toward Melanie. The unholy congregation parted, allowing him to step up to Melanie and seize her violently, slapping her hard when she tried to spit at him. He forced her head back, put a small cut in her neck with a dagger, and let blood bead on the blade. Satisfied, he released her and walked back to the Rahilla. It howled as Turkazim stood before it, but Turkazim was unmoved. He waited a few moments, then he reached up and wiped the flat of the blade on the beast's lower lip.

Ferocity faded, and the Rahilla licked away the blood and appeared to enter a state of beastly bliss. Turkazim watched the effect, then removed a key from his pocket and gestured for the congregation to move back. They began to fan out in a semicircle away from Melanie as he prepared to unshackle the man-beast. He freed its three-toed feet first and finally its hands.

It dropped a few short inches to the ground and immediately seized Turkazim by the shoulders and sent him flying into the grass. The congregation stood firm, and Melanie took a desperate glance around. Her eyes fell on Lana, but all she got was a blank stare. Since her legs were free, she turned around, looking for a space in the circle she might escape through. She was about to run when she saw three people dashing out of the smoke and stones beyond the circle. The three people were Immanuel, Len, and Sheila.

Dan and Jennifer felt awed, frightened, and baffled. They couldn't think of a way to stop a ceremony that involved so much power, so they watched helplessly as Garth picked up the skull, raised it over his head, and uttered some unintelligible words.

The moment Garth's lips stilled, unexpected things began to happen. Suddenly, he burst into flames, an agonized and distorted scream flew from his emptying lungs, then he became a pillar of fire so intense his flesh curled like bark and whitened to ash. His flesh was gone in moments, and his bones blackened and popped like firecrackers. The sacred skull was unharmed, and it remained floating in the air above the fire.

Something moved in the corner of Dan's eye. He turned his head quickly and spotted Randal on the walkway, approaching the sword-bearing priests.

Randal strode toward the priests as if he expected them to part for him, and they, in turn, readied their swords. When he was almost on them, he halted, and a flash of light flew from his eyes. The faces of the guards turned to blood; they stumbled forward, spilling red tears and swinging their swords in wild arcs that came nowhere near Randal.

The fire was fading at the center of the stonehenge. Darkness replaced it, and it whirled and grew white with bones. The bones rattled, settled, and joined the floating skull with a click, and then the darkness was cast aside as the demon, Tukoraka, came to life in a blaze of glory.

Tukoraka lifted a hand of bones in a command for Randal to stop. Then his voice boomed and echoed among the stones. "You would stop me, Randal! I'm afraid not, because the curse is now removed! You are now only a man, a weak creature of the flesh!"

As Turkazim got to his feet, he spotted three figures coming out of the smoke. He recognized the man well in the lead. It was the renegade priest Immanuel. Turkazim got out in front of the Rahilla and managed to block Immanuel, but the collision sent them both onto the grass. As Turkazim stumbled and rolled, he tripped Len, sending him flying.

The Rahilla ignored the activity around it, obeying only the scent of blood as it moved swiftly toward Melanie. It was nearly on her when Sheila charged in, got behind it, and leaped up on its back.

Bucking and kicking, the man-beast charged, trying to throw her, but she managed to hang on long enough to thoroughly disrupt the ceremony. Order spun to chaos as priests and priestesses dodged the angry Rahilla, and it delivered bone-cracking kicks to anyone who got in its way.

Len and Turkazim wrestled in the grass, and a stunned Immanuel was rising to face Averam. Averam had seized Melanie to prevent her from fleeing, but had to release her in order to deal with Immanuel.

Sheila's hold weakened; she waited until the beast bucked hard to make sure she was thrown clear of it, and she landed on her knees in the grass and scrambled away quickly to avoid its deadly three-toed feet. It didn't choose to pursue her; instead, it sniffed the air and turned to Melanie.

Averam had his dagger ready, and he didn't know the Rahilla was free of Sheila. He charged in front of it and struck at Immanuel, but he quickly blocked the dagger. Using Averam's momentum, he tripped and tossed him, sending him tumbling away in the grass. A spare moment remained for Immanuel to block the Rahilla, and as he stepped in the way, Melanie turned and fled. This caused the Rahilla to roar and pace toward Immanuel. Averam

was back up, and he also went for Immanuel, but no fight ensued as Immanuel suddenly began to glow incandescently, emitting blinding flashes.

As Dan watched, a series of bright pulses emanated from Randal, and his body took on an incandescent glow. Randal dropped to his knees as the light faded, and seconds later, he was staring at his outstretched hands. He looked up, the curse was gone, the powers of the blood were gone - it was as he had hoped; only here, the demon would crush him. And Tukoraka was already taking action; he'd turned and was facing the claw of fire floating over the north stones. He waved a hand, and it began to move.

The wish to foil the demon suddenly filled Dan with energy. He sprinted for Randal, accelerating so rapidly he almost overshot him. Pulling him to his feet, he forced him to stumble toward the wall of standing stones. A final push sped him along. Spinning around, Dan looked up; the fiery claw loomed directly overhead, and it now sought him and not Randal. Dan tore his shaman's root from his belt and dropped it as he dived and rolled out of the way of the descending claw. The claw thundered down on a stone slab, and the root exploded into a roaring geyser of fire that sent Tukoraka staggering back to the inner semicircle of standing stones.

Immanuel was now as clear of the curse as Randal, and Averam was stumbling blind. The Rahilla could see, but the blow to its senses had left it very confused, looking around like a doped-up ape. Turkazim was emerging victorious in his battle with Len; he jumped up high and came down with a knee on Len's legs. He grinned with satisfaction when he heard a bone crack, then he yelped as he felt a blade slash his face.

Sheila was the attacker; she'd picked up the dagger Turkazim had dropped in the grass and was putting it to use. Turkazim threw himself back, got to his feet, and stumbled away a few steps trying to get clear of the blade. He glanced over his shoulder as he slowed, and because he wasn't watching where he was going, he crashed head-on into the Rahilla.

Blood from his slashed face splattered the Rahilla, and it immediately seized him by the neck. The grip was crushing, Turkazim's eyes popped as he watched the Rahilla lick a drop of blood off its lips. He struggled, kicked, and pounded, but the blood-hungry man-beast felt no pain. It held the back of his neck with one hand while it used the other to slowly squeeze his throat to pulp. Muscles and tendons popped; his vocal cords were crushed. When his throat was fully softened, the Rahilla pinched it into a pear-shaped bruise, sank its teeth in, and drank deeply.

The dive for cover had left Dan's arm burned and scraped, and as the fire roared into oblivion, he looked over to see what had happened to Randal. It turned out he was unharmed and was foolishly stepping out from the cover of the stones.

The demon king wasn't wasting any more time conjuring up supernatural forces when he could take care of Randal personally. He headed for him, his feet clicking over the stones.

Randal didn't even look at Tukoraka, but instead fell to his knees and began to recite an incantation for the dismissal of the spirits.

"In dei sancto nomine," Randal said, causing the stonehenge to shake.

Tukoraka also shook, and his eye sockets blazed as he closed in. Dan was sprinting again, on a track to the demon.

"Gratius ago sine fraude," Randal said loudly, causing one of the inner stones to split down the middle.

Defensively, Tukoraka swung to his left as Dan leaped at him. He slashed out with a hand of bone that stopped Dan in mid-flight and cut deep gashes in his chest as it threw him aside like a rag doll.

"Umbris, omnibus, tenuibus," Randal said, continuing with the incantation. Only now, Tukoraka was standing over him.

"You've destroyed my plans for a new earth, Randal," the demon king said, "but I still have time to kill you."

A quiet voice came from the darkness, "Even that time has passed." It was Jennifer's voice. She'd taken a sword from one of the dead priests at the gate and moved in behind the demon king. She leaped up and swung the blade. It sank into Tukoraka's skull, shattering a portion of it like plaster. He fell to his knees next to Randal as he recited the last three lines of the incantation. Then there was a brief explosion of light as the demon transformed from bones to a whirl of vanishing phosphor. Wind roared as the time wall encircling the grounds faded, and then silence, death, and the breeze were omens predicting that the ceremony was over.

End Vignette: SUNSET

His breathing eased, and the pain in his lungs gave way to the warmth of healing. A scattershot of pleasant thoughts rose and overcame the fuzz of the painkilling medication. Dan felt pleased, though not fully recovered. It felt good to have a lucid mind worthy of the sunshine, and he'd felt neither worthiness nor sunshine in the hospital. Across the street, a worn path turned into Spencer Park. Jennifer supported him as they crossed the road. He feared the deep breaths that came with exercise. Lungs that might collapse scared him as much as monsters, and he understood that although the demon king had failed to transform the world, the deadliest things were already in it, existing as the commonplace. Disease, accidents, terrible cruelty, and all of the endless little tragedies were enough for the human soul. He didn't enjoy thinking or dreaming about evil priests anymore. High above a white cumulus cloud blew by, and it was like an altar of the gods, existing in the sky, where altars belong. Heaven belonged to the spirits, thoughts, and hearts of all thinking people. Dan's days of ceremonies, new occult magic, priests, and worldwide churches were over.

The walk up the incline to the park felt more like a journey, and for the first time, Dan was seeing exercise as the tiring experience others saw. "You wanted an old man, and now you have one," he said to Jennifer. He kissed her weakly. "There are people in retirement homes with better lungs than mine."

Jennifer smiled, and the twinkle in her eyes said that she didn't quite believe him. "A kick in the groin is the only injury men ever get."

"Why's that?"

"Men only feel pain between their legs. All illness is a loss of prowess that you guys can't face up to."

"That about sums up how I feel."

As the path leveled, they caught sight of the others, sitting around a wading fountain in the park area. Len was up on his crutches near the fall of water, and his baggy casual clothing made him look to be in much worse condition than he was, like he might have cancer or something more than a broken leg. Sheila was a healthier animal. She wore a short red dress and had a hand on Immanuel's leg. She grinned as she whispered something in his ear. Dressed in jeans and a plain blue T-shirt, Immanuel looked nothing like a priest. Dan wasn't sure what Immanuel or Randal were now, but Randal's light summer shirt and trousers didn't point to anything startlingly new.

"I bet you feel like a new man," Len said to Dan as Jennifer helped him to a bench.

"Yeah, I feel like one just put together but not yet broken in."

"Don't take it too hard, pop," Sheila said. "While you're ill, you can concentrate on your book."

"The one you're writing with me," Randal said.

"Did I sign something while I was drugged?" Dan said, causing everyone to laugh.

"No," Randal said. "I've been offered large sums of money by a publisher for the story of the church and how I faked my death. I need you to help me write it."

"The book will be my first fiction novel," Dan said.

"True," Immanuel said, "but we need a cover story. I mean a way of disassociating ourselves from Melanie and the others."

"What exactly did happen to Melanie and the others?" Dan said.

"They're wanted for questioning by the governments of twenty countries and the international police," Randal said. "There is no such animal as a secret agent that can find them. All of the church's assets have been seized. Being wise, I haven't made any attempt to return as high priest."

"What'll we do when they surface?" Dan said.

"They won't," Immanuel said. "When the ceremony fell apart, I followed them. It was like an earthquake in our section. Averam had become blind and ended up pinned under a toppled stone - his death was slow and painful. The others converged at the perimeter where a space had opened in the ceremonial time wall. A jungle showed on the other side, and they went through, thinking it was Cutucu."

"It wasn't Cutucu?" Dan said.

"No. Things were still much in flux. I watched as they took a path into dense tropical forest, and when they were out of sight, I saw some horrible creatures. One came out of some thorn bushes and followed them. It was black and man-sized, with slick, catfish-like skin, three legs, tentacles for

arms, and one eye set in its head. Randal figures they entered the spirit realm of the demon king and can't return."

"We sure can't put any of that in our book, or most of everything else that happened. Not if we want people to believe us."

"We'll think of something to say, but in spiritual ways," Randal said. "I'll have to get back to it later. I have a sunset talk to do, and I want to prepare for it. I'm hoping you'll all attend."

"Sunset talk, what's it about?" Dan said, a baffled look forming on his face. Then his head spun, and for a moment, he almost believed he was still in the hospital and dreaming. He remained silent as he watched Randal stroll off through the park toward a renovated church building across the road.

. . . . The End