

Owl Man's Second Reunion, with the troupe ...

Heron Man had invited Helen to the reunion of Owl Man with Fex, Coo, Sal and the others—Fex's "Hasty Heisters"—but she declined.

"No, my friend, I don't think you need me yet. Later, perhaps. But for now, you and Owl Man and your friends have much business to attend to. I will be present in spirit, though, and if you find that you do need me, all you have to do is invoke me, and before you know it, I'll appear."

Heron, both disappointed and reassured, made the final arrangements. Everyone would be at the reunion—Owl Man's second since his return.

Owl Man had taken what seemed like enough time to rest, but, even so, before the first guest knocked on the door, Owl Man had whispered in Jasmine's ear that he still felt more like a weak and weary raven than a festive owl.

Nonetheless, once all were assembled, he raised his glass with the others to toast not only the success of his trip, but the success of the group's learning the method of *feathers*. He had to admit that their progress surprised him and was enlivening him in this moment as he gazed at the marvelous decorations Jasmine had put out. An Owl banner; Chinese paper lamps festooned with owls; an owl tablecloth and plates and cups; a stuffed owl as centerpiece to the well-set table. Fex was wearing a Halloween owl hat in Owl Man's honor, while Coo was placing origami owls as name tags for seating at the table, which Jasmine had just shouted out for him to do.

Following orders, Owl Man took his place at the table's head, nodded and greeted everyone as they gathered at their places. As he took in Mr. Moto's lightness of foot in spite of his size, he spied a single earring dangling from his left ear: an owl. And Foxy's purse bore a striking, hand-painted collage of owls, which she held up for Owl Man's appreciation. As everyone was now in place, Owl Man took his spoon and clinked the group to order with a light striking of his goblet.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this evening's gathering and what it means for the future. Tomorrow we are going to stop time at Tully's in a practice run for the events that will eventually unfold at Ling Bank."

Owl Man paused and let this news sink in.

No one said a word, but the looking about at one another was feverish.

“Tomorrow, promptly at 10:00 in the morning, we will all gather at Tully’s. Once everyone has arrived and is in place, I will ask each of you to go into *feathers-time* as you have learned to do so expertly under Heron Man’s tutelage. Nothing new in this, just do what you’ve learned to do. Within a few moments I will induce a time squirrel and, except for all of you, you will see that everyone in Tully’s will be in stop-motion, as in a freeze frame on a VCR. Any questions so far?”

Sal spoke up. “What happens to people who come in while everyone is time-stopped?”

“Sal, that is a very astute question. The answer is that no one will be able to open the doors as the place itself will be frozen in time as well. So, no need to be concerned about outsiders. Let’s focus on what happens next.”

Owl Man stood at this point, took up his glass of wine, and began circling the table in slow steady steps.

“When I give the signal, I want each of you to go to the pastry cabinet and begin placing pastries on plates and delivering them to the tables. Do this until the pastry cabinet is empty. As you do this, I want you to take a piece of each pastry and break it off. If you don’t want to eat the piece, put it in the trash. The important thing here is that each piece of pastry will have a piece taken off. Clear?”

“Whatever for, Mr. Owl Man?” It was Sally’s lilting voice that raised the question.

“Ah, you will see in a moment. Now once this is done and everyone is back in place, I’m going to induce a trans-portal repositioning in such a way as to double the pastries, just as we doubled the money in the initial Ling Bank test. These pastries will restock the display shelves, the only difference being that each pastry will have a bite taken out of it or a piece broken off. Once this occurs, the time squirrel will be sent packing and business as usual will once again prevail at Tully’s.”

Owl Man stopped his pacing and took a slow sip of wine.

“What we will want to observe are the reactions of everyone we can, so I want each of you to spread out around the shop and just listen to what people are saying. If all goes well, there should be quite a stir. Once you’ve gathered up your general impressions, I want each of you to

leave and go your separate ways. We will gather here again tomorrow night for dinner and preparation for subsequent events at Ling Bank. Heron, you and I will stay at Tully's for a while to see if anything has gone wrong. And Jasmine, you will need to finish out your shift. Pay particular attention to how Tully deals with the situation."

Owl Man tilted his glass and finished off his wine.

"Any questions?" As everyone was silent, Owl Man sat back down and gave the final orders of the evening.

"Ok, my friends, let's party, and see what tomorrow brings."

Time Stops at Tully's ...

As the raucous party wound down, Fex—not to be outdone by Owl Man—stood up to make *his* grand announcement. Henceforth, he declared, the merry conspirators would be known as the “Hasty Heisters.” Since he was also the self-appointed spokesman for the group, Fex explained the reasoning behind the name: “I’m sayin’ we’re gonna be the Hasty Heisters ‘cause we ain’t gonna be there long—in the bank, I mean. It’s in and out, am I right?” And Fex’s tipsy subordinates cheered.

Sal piped up: “Is he right, Heather?” But Fex was too far into his cups to notice the sexual innuendo. And so Fex’s christening passed without further challenge.

The name was more than a product of drunken revelry, however. In fact, the Hasty Heisters had become a well-oiled unit, like synchronized swimmers or soccer players or, well, disciplined bank robbers planning a heist down to the second. So it was no surprise that the once surly and slovenly group showed up at Tully’s the next morning at 10:00 AM on the dot, alert and ready for action.

Heron Man and Owl Man were already in position, stationed at their usual table with a view of the door. Jasmine was covering her shift, cheerfully going about her business—taking orders, greeting customers and keeping an eye on Tully, with an occasional wink at Owl Man. As the Hasty Heisters arrived, they were careful not to enter the shop in a group, which would have drawn undue attention. Instead, they sauntered in singly or by twos, like animals boarding the Ark. Once inside they casually fanned out, occupying tables and counters, inspecting the menus—relaxed and nonchalant in all respects.

Then it happened.

At Owl Man’s signal—for which he stretched his neck, rotated his head and blinked three times—the Heisters instantly dropped into feather-mode, plummeting into the tunnel of the bird’s throat. The entire coffee shop, and everyone in it, began to reverberate with that by-now-familiar moaning, that low-frequency warble, and Time itself ground down to a shuddering halt. Coffee cups hung in the air, eternally drawn toward lips that were poised to sip, a longing never quite quenched. Molecules of steam-vapor shot from the espresso machine into billowing clouds that sat immobilized as if pasted onto the air, like word-balloons in a comic book. Red-faced, rusty-bearded Tully leaned toward the register, fist full of cash, fierce eyes fixed on the shape of an

exiting customer's hips.

Into this state of suspended animation Owl Man's voice rang slowly. The effect resembled that of a clanging buoy dimly heard by a helmeted diver below, trudging with leaden feet through forests of kelp.

"Nowwww," said Owl Man.

And the Heisters all glided toward the flash-frozen pastry case. Everything unfolded as scripted, except when Foxy tried to take *two* chocolate-covered croissants, one of which Sal had already grasped. But Foxy released the second croissant into Sal's spongy grip, and a crisis was averted. Fex looked into the case for a long time, but only took one jellied donut. Mr. Moto, moving as lightly as Tinker Bell, found an oversized bear claw. Finally everyone had their one pastry.

Following Owl Man's instructions, they each took one bite, except for Sally, who picked up a knife and cut one corner off her lemon tart. Sally nearly broke the spell by speaking during the slow-motion scene: "I'mmm tryingg to looose weeeight," she said, struggling to enunciate. The low-pitched words sounded like they had been sucked through a long tube. Fortunately, the trance remained unbroken by this intrusion of dangerous self-consciousness, and Sally's brief lapse passed like a bubble ejected from a spitting clam.

The Heisters assumed their original positions. Owl Man, having watched the entire TPR event with eyes the size of coconuts, raised his arms again and clapped his hands, and again the report split the air like a rifle-shot. The trance dissolved and, in a flash, time and movement resumed throughout the coffee shop. Cups sailed toward waiting lips, customers chattered, dishes clattered, steam burst from the jet.

"Ouch," shouted Jimmy, whose hand had been hovering near the nozzle as the steam resumed its pressured trajectory.

"Hey, you didn't give me my change yet," shouted one irritated customer to Jasmine, who was taken by surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Yes, you're right. I owe you another quarter. Here you are," she said pleasantly, and the customer, not to be mollified, harrumphed out the door.

"Jasmine, lass," shouted Tully, turning from the disgruntled customer back to Jasmine. "Have ye got any more ones wi' ye, girl? I'll buy 'em from ye." And Jasmine took a thick wad of ones from her tips pocket and sold them to Tully for tens.

Owl Man and Heron Man surveyed the scene. Apparently the breach in the flow of time had healed over with no noticeable disturbance, save perhaps for Jimmy's mild steam burn. But that was par for Jimmy, who was known to ogle pretty customers while twisting the steam valve, with more than one slight burn to show for it.

"Well," said Heron Man, "what do you think?"

"What I think is," said Owl Man carefully, "take a look at the pastry case."

Heron Man glanced at the shining glass case. Where a few minutes before it had been nearly depleted, now it was nearly full. The strange thing, however, was that each piece of fresh, untouched pastry had one small portion missing.

Heron Man looked at Owl Man. The two old birds nodded at one another and adjusted their feathers contentedly. Heron Man then stood and took his and Owl Man's cups to the counter.

"Oh, Jasmine," he called pleasantly. "I think Owlie and I are ready for a re-fill, if you don't mind. And I think we'll take two of those croissants, the ones with the little notches in the side."

While Heron Man was placing his order, Tully sidled up to Jasmine behind the counter. This gave Heron Man an opportunity to study Tully's face. Not ten minutes earlier, the old Scot's craggy face was red, wrinkled and leathery, almost contorted—a product of Tully's volatile mixture of boisterous jollity and barely-suppressed rage. But now, Heron Man noticed, the reddened tautness was gone, as if a softening had taken place and healthy elasticity now graced the mobile tissues covering the bones of Tully's face.

Another thing Heron Man noticed was the way Tully looked at Jasmine, his normally rueful Celtic eyes shining like one of Dante's *fideli d'amore*. Heron might have written this off to Tully's lovelorn Scottish soul, except for one thing: Jasmine herself. Her face, always pretty, was now extraordinarily soft and glowing. It was certainly not the thin, streaky light of this typical Seattle morning that illumined her, however. This was a different light—full and radiant, and it seemed more of an inward light, yet it beamed outward. It was, in a word, *auric light*.

When Tully drew within a certain distance of Jasmine, Heron Man observed, he—Tully—also began to glow. Yet if he stepped only a foot or two away, the glow drained away. Take a step closer to Jasmine, and there it was again—Tully's face glowing with a golden light.

Yes, thought Heron Man, Jasmine was definitely having a perceptible proximity-effect on

Tully—visible, at least, to Heron Man. Whether Tully was aware of it was another matter. The only sensible conclusion was that Jasmine had carried over some remarkable, emotive energy-field from the transportal re-positioning event, or from the trance-state that preceded it.

Again, Heron Man was forcefully reminded of the nimbus—the haloes—in old religious paintings. *Yes, this must be that same beatific effect*, thought Heron Man.

“Will that be all, Heron Man?”

“What? Oh, I’m sorry, Jasmine. Got distracted for a moment. Yes, that will be all.”

Jasmine had caught Heron Man off-guard, staring at her and Tully.

“Coming right up then, Heron,” said Jasmine sweetly, and she filled the porcelain cups with steaming coffee. Then she placed two half-moon pastries on a white plate, with delicate silver tongs.

Someone, or something, is onto us ...

The dry run that morning at Tully's succeeded, and more than anyone had a right to expect. Even Foxy did her bit, without being distracted by her damnable, unpredictable "voices"—or did the voices dwell in the TPR zone all the time?

At any rate, the troupe held a de-briefing meeting that night—again at Jasmine's—and the room buzzed with excitement as everyone raved over their exploits—everyone except Owl Man, that is. The Owl seemed unusually quiet, preoccupied, even a bit disgruntled. Finally the meeting was over, and Jasmine said good-night to Heron Man, the last one to leave.

Her voice hung in the air as she closed the door, turned and leaned her back against it. Her arms were folded as she scowled at Owl Man, still slouched in his chair.

"What?" said Owl Man.

Apart from whatever was disturbing him, his mind was filling with thoughts of bed, but Jasmine's eyes were saying, "No bed for you, fella," until what she had on her mind was thoroughly hashed. After hosting the Tully's debriefing and the final preparations for the upcoming main event, he was in no mood for hashing. But he could see a storm was brewing.

"Why were you such an asshole tonight? You dug your talons into everyone's neck. I've never heard such god-awful screeching coming from you before, Owlie. Is something wrong?" Jasmine unfolded her arms, stepped closer to Owl Man, and put her palms to his cheeks. "What is it, sweetie?"

"Everyone screwed up today. In minor ways, yes, but—" Owl Man stopped himself in mid-sentence, as if his mind had been yanked away by the felt sense of an unseen predator.

"But it all went OK, so what's the big deal?" Jasmine now had her hands on her hips and once again her storm was gathering steam.

"Ah, Jaz, there's where you and the others aren't quite with it. Yes, it was good enough to pull off the Tully's practice, and no one else noticed some of the things that were on the verge of breaking up. But I saw. I saw something that tells me we are in trouble. That's why I was trying to get everyone in this ragtag group to shape up and really be at the top of their form for the big event."

"What kind of trouble are we talking about? I didn't see anything that looked like trouble to me." Jasmine's scowl was full on.

The knock at the door startled them both.

Jasmine called out, "Who's there?"

"A bird and nothing more." It was Heron Man.

Jasmine opened the door. Heron stood in the doorway, looked past Jasmine and met Owl Man's gaze. "Something's been troubling me, Owl, and I didn't mention it at the gathering because I couldn't quite pin it down until just now."

"Won't you come in, Heron?" Jasmine's tone was inviting, but Heron stood still.

"No, I just want to put in words what's troubling me and then be off. Owl Man, you saw the glow about Jasmine's head during the peak of the transportal event this morning, right?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"I'm pretty sure now that what's bothering me is that this may have constellated an intrusion of some sort, actually attracted something. Did it bother you?"

"I was just going to tell Jasmine that I thought we were in trouble. But the glow around Jasmine was the least of it."

"There's more?" Heron Man's head jerked back as if he'd been jarred.

"Yes, Heron. At the edges of the whole event there was a gathering darkness, not definite enough to register on everyone. But it was there and gathering strength. I saw it." Owl Man stepped past Jasmine and put his hand on Heron's shoulder.

"What do you think, Owl?" Heron's concern was evident.

"I think someone, or something, is on to us."

Irma's Diner—A Perch for Night Herons ...

So that's it, thought Heron Man. We're at the excruciating point, the crux of the matter. We've reached the narrow passage and, afterwards, there will be no turning back. No more games. No more fictions. It's all for keeps.

Quietly, he closed the door on Jasmine and Owl Man, leaving them to their devices—amorous or otherwise.

He walked like a heron-ghost, an unfolding hieroglyph, through the foyer of Jasmine's Art Deco building. Outside, he glided down seven steps to the slick sidewalk, disappearing into a soupy Seattle mist, thick as chowder but cold as snowmelt.

Heron mulled over the situation to a fine powder, as he walked.

That halo, that aura surrounding Jasmine's face, has called up something dark. Or was the halo called up to resist the darkness already swarming? Or did we summon the darkness with our pagan, bird-throated chanting and our greedy planning. Planning for what? A bank robbery? No. We're not robbing anybody, we're simply duplicating money by means of a time-stutter—no loss, no pain, right? Come to think of it, we're not even duplicating it, because the money's already there ... we just don't know where "there" is. But did we really think it would be as simple and pure as that? Why don't we just make a Faustian bargain with the Devil and be done with it?

Thus spiraled Heron Man's dark thoughts and imaginings, up and down the twisting ladders of his imagination, like old Hindu serpents.

It was dinnertime, but Heron Man had lost his appetite. By now, Owl Man and Jasmine were probably lying abed like poets, "with all their griefs in their arms"—or were they at each others' throats? Heron Man could just see the *Come Ye Heather*, filled with cigar smoke, Fex's stereo belting out "Mashed Potato Time" as Fex and Heather practiced their dance steps. Sal might be reviewing accounts in his head or trying to square the circle. Coo was—well, who knew what Coo was doing? Or Foxy? Forget it.

As for Heron Man, an unusual restlessness had seized him ever since Owl had made his ominous Delphic declaration: "Someone, or something, is on to us."

Passing by a small, dimly-lighted diner, and having no better place to go, Heron pulled on the glass-and-aluminum door and entered. A flickering neon sign buzzed in the window:

“EATS.” *That says it all*, thought Heron, *no rating stars, no Sunday Supplement reviews for this joint*. But as he entered, Heron Man could see on the grizzled fry cook’s apron a few unsoiled patches of white floating above the surrounding grime. And he estimated that the waitress had wiped down the counter at least once in the last twenty-four hours.

“I’ll have coffee,” said Heron Man.

“That’s it?” replied the waitress, staring intently at Heron Man while vigorously chewing a wad of gum. “Must be my lucky day.”

“Your what?” Heron Man shook his head as if to re-focus his thoughts.

“My day. My day. Big spender like you comes in, makes my day. Get it?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I’m a bit distracted tonight. You from around here?”

“Do I sound like it?”

“No, you don’t, actually. I’m guessing New York.”

“Close, honey, but no banana. I’m from Yonkers. Call me Irma.”

“Hi, Irma. Call me Heron.”

“You mean like the skinny bird?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call them skinny, Irma, but, yeah, like the bird.”

“OK, Mr. Skinny Bird. Anything else?”

“Maybe a bowl of soup, Irma. Got any?”

“Hey, Lou! We got any soup left?”

From the pass-through opening Lou blew his purple nose and shouted, “Yeah, we got a little bit left. Minestrone.”

“OK, Irma,” said a subdued Heron Man, “I’ll have a cup of minestrone. And some crackers, please.”

“It’s your funeral, Mr. Skinny Bird,” said the girl. “Comin’ right up.”

“Funeral?” said Heron Man with a start. “Is that what you said?”

“Yeah,” said Irma, “you look like you’re on your way to a funeral, or like you just got back—if you don’t mind my sayin’, that is.”

“No, no, I don’t mind. Sorry, Irma, I, uh, didn’t realize—”

“Yeah, you look pretty glum, mister. But tell me your problem and I’ll help you figure it out. I’m pretty good at Tarot and stuff—palm readin’, ESP, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, it’s nothing I can really talk about.”

“Of course you can’t. That’s what they all say. But don’t worry, hon, just change the names to protect the innocent, know what I mean? Doll it up a bit so’s I won’t know who you’re talkin’ about. You can trust me. Besides, who am I gonna tell? Lou?”

At that point Lou slid a bowl of soup across the metal shelf. Irma placed it on the counter in front of Heron.

And like all herons, Heron Man took his time. He slowly pulled the bowl toward him, stared into the liquid like a tea-leaf reader, speared one carrot cube, chewed it briefly and downed it in one gulp.

“Boy, you really take your time, don’t you, Mr. Heron?”

“Believe me, Irma, I’m in no rush, at least not at the moment.”

The electric clock on the wall made a faint grinding sound and the second-hand slipped a notch.

“Humph,” muttered Heron Man. “That’s my problem right there.”

Irma turned and glanced at the clock. “What? You got a time problem?”

“That’s putting it mildly, Irma. I’ve got a *big* time problem—when it slips, that is, sort of like your clock up there.”

“Let me guess: Just when you got one thing up your sleeve, some other thing comes along and starts crawlin’ up the back of your neck. So when the clock slips you get jumpy. It shows.”

“You’re warm, Irma, but—really—I can’t say anything about it.”

“Don’t. Don’t say nothin’ then. Soon as you walked in, you want to know the Tarot card I saw?”

“I’m not sure I do, Irma.”

“The Hanging Man card. That’s what I saw. Not good.”

Heron considered this freshly compounded interest on his fund of bad news.

“Lemme see your hand,” said Irma as she grabbed both of Heron Man’s hands and pulled them across the counter towards her.

“HMMMM. Unh hunh. Yeahhh.”

“Well, don’t just hem and haw, Irma. Tell me what you see,” said Heron, uncharacteristically short-tempered.

“I see”— she began—“besides the dark clouds blowing and other stuff, I see ... something. Yeah, it’s a person. Or like a person. A shadow, maybe, walking out of the clouds.

Wait! There are two of them. Two shadows! They move like people but I can't tell yet. One of them has a face. It's a woman."

"Irma," Heron interrupted, "you're not reading my palm, you're fantasizing!"

"Yeah? What's the difference? It's all in the space between my head and yours anyway."

"The space between us? Then why can't I see it?"

"Well, hon," said Irma, releasing Heron Man's hands, "it's because you ain't lookin'! Or maybe you just ain't seein'."

"Hey, Irma," yelled Lou from the kitchen. "You got a customer just walked in."

Heron Man and Irma both swiveled their heads as a fog-sopped figure loomed in the doorway. Sizing up the new arrival, head to toe, Irma whistled. Heron's eyes popped open as he recognized Mr. Moto bulging toward him.

But Heron Man was surprised at more than just Mr. Moto's unexpected arrival. There was something different about Mr. Moto's face, which normally toggled between two expressive modes: blank impassivity and total impassivity—even when in a towering rage. Tonight, however, Mr. Moto's face resembled animated stone—fixed, yet writhing with an unfamiliar, Medusa-like mobility. After a moment's pause, Heron Man realized what he found so troubling: Mr. Moto actually looked worried. In fact, what Heron saw chiseled on the Mt. Rushmore of Mr. Moto's face seemed just a hammer-blow away from an expression of sheer terror.

Shaman Song—Mr. Moto's Report ...

Heron Man gestured to Irma to disappear, which she was happy to do after witnessing Mr. Moto's frightful countenance. She turned away and busied herself by filling salt-and-pepper shakers and napkin holders behind the counter. Heron Man moved from the counter to a private booth at the back of the diner.

Mr. Moto, stiff as a zombie, followed Heron Man into the dimly-lighted corner and sat down, collapsing the Naugahyde cushion in the process. After much persuasion and considerable tact, Heron Man finally began piecing together the shards of Mr. Moto's story:

Sal told Coo who told Sally and Fex who told Heather and Foxy who told Mr. Moto—that Old Man Ling had been nosing around the bank with unusual frequency lately. In a tearful tête-à-tête with Jolene, Sal learned that Old Man Ling knew all about the dust-up with the FBI agents, Jolene's temporary detention and interrogation, the missing-but-not-missing \$90,000, down to the exact details of Jolene's gambling debts.

"What? How the hell did Old Man Ling learn about the ninety large?" sputtered Heron Man.

"Foxy say, 'Whispers.' Foxy smart lady," averred the ever-loyal Mr. Moto.

What Foxy meant by "whispers" was that, in a closed environment such as a bank lobby, an intrusion as shocking as an FBI investigation—however brief or informal—would never go unnoticed. And despite the old adage, "Loose lips sink ships," loose lips throughout the bank flapped wildly at the least provocation. Whispers, not Vespers, were the modern devotional.

With additional prodding, Heron Man learned still more disturbing news. Having asked around on the street and in the gym where he worked out, Mr. Moto heard rumors that a legendary Chinese shaman, normally next to invisible, had been sighted around town of late.

"Chinese shaman? Oh sweet Jesus! Do you know his name, Mr. Moto?"

"Name is . . . Chu Lin Song." Mr. Moto shivered when he reluctantly uttered the syllables.

"What's the matter, Mr. Moto? His *name* is not going to hurt you," said Heron Man.

"Name hurt. Name is . . . very dangerous. Every letter, not good. Very bad man. Bad magic."

"You mean this . . . this Mr. Chu Lin Song is a Chinese black magician?"

“Yes. Magic expert. Listen to me. Moto work with weights, Chu Lin Song work with spirits. Bad spirits. Spirits work for him. Very bad man.”

Adopting his most confident, reassuring sound, Heron Man intoned, “Hell, Mr. Moto, this Chu Lin Song character, this so-called magician, doesn’t even know you, or where you live.”

“He know. I see him already. He find me in dream. Bad dream.”

“Wait, wait, wait, Mr. Moto, wait a minute. Are you saying that Chu Lin Song, this black magician, *entered your dream ... on purpose?*”

“Yes. Very bad. Almost kill Moto. Very bad man. Bad magician. Moto ... Moto scared.”

Heron Man, seeing Mr. Moto shaken to bedrock depths, made some quick calculations: If Chu Lin Song had willfully entered Mr. Moto’s dream and threatened him *there*, then the whole heist operation was in jeopardy. For what were Heron Man, Owl Man, Fex, Coo and all the others proposing to do, but to carry out a *shamanic raid* on the very heart of Old Man Ling’s secretive, shady banking operations empire. And in the dark, convoluted realm of quantum-time, *every second* means bags of money for Old Man Ling.

Irma waited for a break in the whispered conversation, then brought two cups of freshly-brewed coffee.

“It’s on me, guys. Pardon the interruption.”

“Oh, thanks, Irma. You’re a doll.”

Irma winked and hustled back to the counter. She didn’t know what they were talking about and she didn’t want to know.

Heron Man took a sip of coffee and resumed his deliberations.

Sal was a nerve conduit in all this. He knew about Jolene’s gambling debts—the gambling den in Chinatown was but one of Old Man Ling’s many operations. Sal also knew about the pressure Old Man Ling was putting on Jolene, through his agents, to pay off the debts. But if Sal was a nerve conduit, Old Man Ling was a walking *nerve center*. Therefore, it all made sense—Old Man Ling had indeed hired this legendary Chinese shaman to intercept and disrupt the entire trans-portal re-positioning caper, not as some cheap street fighter but something far more dangerous—an accomplished thug of dreams.

Heron Man agreed with Mr. Moto. This was a critical situation. And even if they called off the heist tonight, they were all still in danger. Thus, Owl Man’s intuition was correct:

Someone, or something, was on to them

A Middle-of-the-Nighter...

“Owlie, what are you doing?”

“Just had a dream I want to work on. I won’t be long. Back to sleep, Jaz.”

Owl Man closed the bedroom door. He could tell from Jasmine’s breathing she was already drifting off. No question about it. Jasmine had not had a dream with the threatening shaman. He'd think more about this as soon as he talked to Heron. He turned on the desk light. He did not reach for his journal or for the Agatha Christie. Instead, he picked up his cell phone and pressed the speed-dial key for Heron Man.

“Since you answered on first ring, I assume I didn’t wake you. Good. Listen. I know who's on to us. Yes, it’s Chu Lin Song, but how do *you* know that? Ah, Mr. Moto's dream. Then what I fear has begun. We must contact everyone involved now and set up an early morning meeting at Tully’s. We cannot proceed with the plan until we can develop something to foil the Shaman’s power. Can you come now? This can't wait. Excellent. See you shortly.”

Owl Man took up the Agatha Christie, sat down, holding the pen close to his eyes with an end in each hand. Whispering, he spoke to the pen: “This is going to be a rough one, old girl.” Owl Man rested the pen on the bridge of his nose and sank into reverie awaiting Heron Man's arrival.

Owl Man’s eyes snapped open at Heron’s knocking on the door. Pen in hand, Owl Man opened the door and welcomed Heron.

“We haven’t had a middle-of-the-nighter since that dustup in China. Same foe, looks like, and I bet he’s none too happy about being bested back then.” Heron paused and studied the expression on Owl Man’s face. “I gather you are not sanguine about tomorrow’s outcome.”

“Right you are. Listen to this dream I just had, and you will see why.”

Owl Man stepped over to the liquor cabinet bar and took a couple of glasses from the bar. The bottle he selected was Macallan’s 18-year-old single malt. He handed Heron one of the glasses and sat at the desk.

“Must be something, Owl, to put out the old 18.”

“Warm your throat, Heron, and brace yourself. In this dream, I am in a completely white room without any obvious doors or windows. Seamless white. No furniture and nothing else. It was impossible to get one’s bearings. Laughter breaks into this bizarre ambience. More like a

malevolent cackle than a laugh, and no way to place its origin. After a time the cackle ceases and a deep voice says, “Hello, Mr. Owl Man. We meet again.”

“So it *is* you,” I say. “How did you get in my dream? I had you permanently blocked.”

“Oh, that is not the question, Owl. That only shows you are rather behind in your continuing education. The question is, can you find a way out of this room? This is where you will be tomorrow at the critical moment of your now old-fashioned transportal repositioning. I just thought I’d give you a head start. Something I will not do for the others of your silly troupe. But I enjoy our games, Owl Man. I hope you will enjoy this one. Until the ’morrow then.”

“The cackle sounded louder than before, reached a deafening crescendo before dying away. That’s the dream, Heron. Were you able to reach the others?”

Heron Man had stood listening to Owl Man’s dream. He took another swallow of the golden elixir and said, “I reached Coo directly and he said he’d had a disturbing dream, something similar to the one Mr. Moto told me. He’s going to call the others and tell them about the meeting tomorrow morning. I don’t like the sound of this, Owl Man.”

“Believe me, there is nothing to like about the appearance of Shaman Song. He’s the most powerful of those known as “The Shamans of Doom.” Nearly cost me my life last time. But all shamans have weaknesses and I know his. Remember today at Tully’s, that aura around Jasmine’s head?”

“Yes, I did. It was quite stunning. What do you think it was?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I think everyone will have an invasive dream *except* Jasmine and, most likely, Helen. There may even be some other feminine presence that we’re not even aware of that could bring him down. But, still, we must not let down our guard.”

Both Owl and Heron lifted their glasses and sipped their Macallan at the same time, almost as if they were toasting.

“I know that Jasmine’s aura protects her in some way,” said Owl Man, resuming his reflections. “This *deep and creative feminine potency* must somehow be the key to foiling Chu Lin Song’s powers. I know his weakness for women, and it was what enabled me to better him in China, the last time. I know this puts Jasmine at extreme risk—perhaps even more than Helen, because Jasmine is so much more ... so much more ... incarnated, shall we say, than Helen—”

Heron Man interrupted sharply at this point and simply said, by way of correction, “embodied.” Owl Man agreed immediately, then continued.

“As I was saying, unless Jasmine is full-on to carry out what she may need to do, then we are going to close our computers, put Agatha back in her case, turn our backs, and walk away.”

Heron Man administers imaginal first aid to Owl Man ...

Owl Man’s mention of the “little dustup in China” was a characteristic bit of understatement. In truth, it had been a legendary shamanic battle, the psychic equivalent of a monster martial-arts *mêlée*. The outcome had been toasted in centers of shamanic activity around the world. Tiny cups of *sake*, sprigs of burning sage, schooners of ale, heavy steins of Hefeweizen and cut-glass decanters of single-malt Scotch, including Owl Man’s 18-year Macallan, a gift from his China cohort—all had been pressed into service to celebrate the occasion.

During the actual showdown, Owl Man had employed a little-known yet critical asset—a makeshift helmet he had assembled out of cast-off materials. Used exclusively for dreaming, he called it his *casque-rêve*, and it looked like a cross between a WWII fighter pilot’s leather helmet and a boxer’s practice headgear. The principle was simple enough, and ancient—sensory deprivation as a means of amplifying the “dream signal” and, thus, Owl Man’s shamanic imagination. Wearing it was more or less equivalent to entering a cave. It may have had a comical look, but it worked beautifully and probably saved Owl Man’s life.

Considering the urgency of the current situation, Heron Man intended to make full use of every weapon, including the *casque-rêve*.

“Still got that old dream-helmet, Owl Man?”

“Of course, it’s right by the bed.”

“Well, it worked so well in China, maybe you’d better slip in there and grab it, assuming, that is, you can put your hands on *it* and not on Jasmine. No need to be waking her. She needs her beauty sleep, God knows, and tonight more than ever.”

So, light as a London fog, Owl Man slipped silently into the bedroom and was out again in an instant, *casque-rêve* in hand. He pulled the device over his head and stood facing Heron Man, eyes wide open, ear-flaps upward, arms to the side, like a Great Horned Owl airing out its wings.

“OK, Owl, my friend,” said Heron solemnly. “You know what we’re up against. Since Chu Lin Song got the jump on you, we’ve got to unwind his spool a bit. Once you’ve cracked his spell you’ll need to gather all the backup protection you can from the Spirit of the Owls—and

Hérons too, for that matter. Jasmine is going to need your support like never before. But by the time we're finished here I think the APB will be out to all owls and herons in the vicinity; and Jasmine, I trust, will be safe."

While Heron Man was speaking, Owl Man settled into his reclining leather chair, fastened the straps on his helmet and placed his hands on the armrests, ready for Heron Man to secure them.

"Too tight?"

"Ummphh." Owl Man shook his head. Such was the mesmeric, even Pavlovian, effect of the strange headpiece, that Owl Man was already slurring a bit as he slipped down toward the trance-state.

"Now, from here on out, Owl Man, let me guide you. I'll speak slowly and clearly. Can you hear me all right?"

Owl nodded his head and the dream-helmet bobbed up and down. Heron Man continued.

"Now, let's move slowly toward the dream state, Owl. Relax our way down there. When you arrive, nod once to let me know if you're still in white-out."

After a brief interval—a single nod.

"Still white, huh? That arrogant bastard," Heron Man muttered to himself. "Next thing you know Chu Lin Song will try to stop the wind!"

Heron Man adjusted Owl Man's wrist straps then leaned toward him, speaking softly. "Owl Man? We're not going to let him erase your imagination or control your dreams, do you understand? That's what he's trying to do. Now, first we're going to establish a simple memory baseline. I'm going to name a few stimulus objects, and as soon as an image breaks the symmetry of the whiteness, I want you to tap your right index finger on the armrest. Don't try to speak. Just tap. Now, I want you to visualize a ... coffee cup."

Owl Man's finger did not stir.

"Nothing? OK. Well, then, how about ... a daily newspaper?"

No movement.

"Still nothing? OK. Next."

The work proceeded in this fashion for some time. A few hundred stimulus-words had elicited only a few flickers of Owl Man's finger on the armrest, but Heron Man was encouraged; at least there was *some* movement. Therefore, he concluded, Owl Man's mental dream-screen

wasn't totally blank. Chu Lin Song had not erased him quite to the degree he thought.

“What about the Agatha Christie? Are you getting anything there?”

Owl Man tapped his finger once and nodded.

“OK, that's good. We're getting a hit off the Agatha Christie.”

Heron Man could see that Owl Man's face was beginning to glisten with beads of sweat, and his skin, around the helmet, seemed to be turning a sickly, greenish-white, like swamp-light over a bog. Owl's hands were trembling.

“How do you feel right now?” whispered Heron.

Owl Man shook his head from side to side, to indicate a mounting nausea or malaise.

“OK, let's move faster. Now, listen carefully, Owl Man. I want you to try to visualize ... Jasmine's hair.”

At this Owl Man's hand strained against the straps and his index finger flapped up and down frantically. He struggled to free himself, so Heron Man deftly released both restraints. Once free, Owl Man tore the dream-helmet off his head and sucked in great bellows of air like a pearl diver surfacing from the deepest oyster beds.

“I saw it! I saw it! Jasmine's hair, yes, yes, oh the beautiful creature! Yes, I knew it! Chu Lin Song doesn't realize that my dear Jasmine will prove to be his downfall! He thinks he can control her, he thinks he can look into her eyes and see himself reflected there, but he's dead wrong. He doesn't stand a chance! He'll never see himself reflected in her, he would only see”—here Owl Man grasped for an appropriate image—“magnolia blossoms under a full moon, or, or the play of sunlight over opals, or—”

Owl Man was beside himself, trembling with an ecstatic joy. Heron Man gently took a warm blanket and wrapped it around the Owl's shivering shoulders. Then he sat him down at the table, splashed another dash of 18-year ambrosia into his glass and pushed it in front of him.

“Don't get chilled now, Owl Man. Let the Macallan do the talking for a while.”

“Yes, yes, thank you, Heron, thank you. Good work, lad.” And he savored a slow sip. “Now, if you would be so kind as to bring me the Agatha Christie and a few sheets of that creamy bonded paper, I'd be very grateful. I must make some notes.”

Thus provisioned, Owl Man set about putting pen to paper. Heron Man watched amazed as *der zauberFederhalter*—the magic fountain pen, as Owl sometimes called her in a German phrase he had coined—slid across the paper like a stick of butter on a hot griddle. Heron Man

knew better than to peek over Owl Man's shoulder to see what he was writing. Instead, he splashed a finger of Macallan into his own glass, took a seat, and patiently waited while Owl Man made his notes, or whatever they were. The way the pen was flying, it seemed the Owl Man could have been writing anything from a treatise on shamanic battle tactics to courtly love sonnets.

A shuffling sound came from the bedroom as Jasmine walked in wearing a robe and slippers. Her hair was piled on top of her head, fastened with a chopstick.

“What are you guys doing?” she mumbled.

Owl Man raised his head and gazed wide-eyed at Jasmine. For a moment Heron Man thought he detected the same golden aura emanating from Owl Man that he had seen on Jasmine not so long before.

Owl Man and the names of the Muses ...

Owl Man woke with a start, raising his head abruptly from the table where he had fallen asleep at the page. The Agatha Christie was nowhere to be seen. The pages were scattered about on the desk and floor as if some wind had visited Owl Man as he slumbered. Heron Man had left the apartment and Jasmine had gone back to bed.

“Of course I know the names of all the Muses.” Owl Man spoke back to the dream-voice that was fading away as he came awake, and as much as naming them allowed: “Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, and Urania. See, just like I taught them in school.”

“You’ve forgotten one, haven’t you, Mr. Owl?” said the voice, in barely a whisper.

“She’s right, damn it. I’ve forgotten Melpomene!”

“The Muse of *tragedy*, Mr. Owl, is not something to forget.” The voice—Helen’s voice from the dream—trailed off. A warning.

He scooted his chair back and, kneeling down, gathered up the pages from the floor. The cap of the pen was under one of the pages, but he could not see the pen itself. He bent down fully, looked under the desk, and there it was. Seeing how he had treated the cherished pen filled him with foreboding, only increased at his forgetting of Melpomene. He had no memory of what he had written, but the dream he woke with was etched in his now throbbing head. She had come as something like a mechanical bat flapping her steely wings in front of his eyes, and as she spoke, at first incomprehensibly and then with a sweetness that drew him toward her, she metamorphosed into Heron Man’s Helen, sitting on the desk. He knew he should not, but something compelled him to reach out for her. She stopped him with her eyes first, then with her question: “Do you know the name of *all* the Muses?”

He sat back in the chair, scooted up to the desk. He recapped the pen and hoped no serious damage was done to it, but he did not want to deal with that now. He wanted to see what he had written, as he had no memory of it at all. He gathered up all the pages and tapped them into a stack. He began leafing through the stack, knowing that the pages would be out of order but that could be remedied easily enough from the context. Only lines.

This had never happened before. On every page, only a few straight lines and dashed lines, but no words, no images, nothing but lines. “What the hell does this mean?” But no, he knew that the “meaning question” was always a side-track, a distraction to occupy the mind with endless possibilities. No. He knew the right question was “What do I have here. Really look, Owl, use those big eyes and look in the way Goethe would look. What do you see?”

He stared at each page in turn, looking intently.

There were ten pages.

He put himself into a kind of dream space and looked and looked and looked through the pages, over and over.

He bolted upright. “They are *gua*!”

“Jasmine,” he called out. “Jasmine, come here.”

Jasmine opened the bedroom door. She stood there wiping sleep from her eyes. “What is it, Owl?”

“My God, Jasmine, the Agatha Christie has written out ten *gua*. Bring me your *I Ching*!”

“Which one?”

“The Huang translation. Quickly girl, I’m feeling we don’t have much time.”

Owl Man knew the hexagrams but he wanted to make sure and double-check with Huang, his favorite. He knew the order would be wrong, as the pages had been scattered. But some sages even suggested this way of approaching the question. So he’d start with the *gua* names and then see if he could order them into a meaningful statement as a way of unearthing the question.

“Hurry, Jasmine. I feel a tragedy brewing!”

“Here you go, my Owl. What’s this all about?”

“Just make me some coffee, Jaz. I’ve got to concentrate.”

He took a blank sheet and began to write the names of the hexagrams from the six lines

and dashes on each of the ten pages.

64. Not Yet Fulfilled.

24. Turning Back.

29. Darkness.

33. Retreat.

33. Abundance.

36. Brilliance Injured.

21. Eradicating.

1. Initiating.

6. Contention.

20. Watching.

“Good God, I had no idea!”

He spun around just as Jasmine was bringing coffee and crashed into her.

“Brilliance injured, indeed,” he whispered to her.

“Owl! Look at this mess!”

“Leave it, Jaz. Get dressed. We’ve got to go. Now!”

Hexagram 64: Not yet fulfilled ...

Shaman Song moved through the physical world with a feline grace more reminiscent of an ocelot or a cheetah than a human. Thus, when he entered the Rim of Fire Sushi Bar just past midnight, he did not walk so much as he *sidled* through the door. And once inside, instead of proceeding directly to his destination—Old Man Ling’s office on the mezzanine level—he took a strangely errant path, as if following ancient ley lines visible only to him. Old Man Ling had issued explicit instructions to come *directly* to his office without delay, yet still the shaman insisted on following his weaving, bamboo-jungle path.

The Rim of Fire, one of Ling’s many holdings, was a trendy, mod watering hole for the rich and powerful of Seattle. They gathered there at all hours, to see and be seen, to move large sums of money with a handshake or a nod of the head. No one seemed to care how the beautiful people achieved their wealth or their power. The important thing was the possession of it, and the recognition it brought. More than one envelope stuffed with cash had been slipped into the inside pocket of a silk suit, over sleek trays of sashimi, spider rolls and tiny dishes of *uni*—sea urchin roe.

The door to Old Man Ling’s office opened as Shaman Song was raising his hand to knock. The entire building was wired with surveillance cameras, and a team of lookouts and bodyguards had followed Song’s winding progress through the building and up the stairs to the office door.

“You late,” said Old Man Ling, flicking a cigarette ash from its ivory holder in the direction of a desktop ashtray. His eyes were nearly closed, and he was leaning so far back on his swivel chair that he seemed to be asleep. Shaman Song knew better.

Bowing deeply in the direction of the old man, Song said quietly, “Little fox who cross river too soon, get tail wet.”

“Humph,” muttered Old Man Ling, knowing he had been trumped. He was just as familiar with the *I Ching* as Shaman Song, and could not deny the shaman’s logic.

“So, in other word, no harvest yet,” replied the old man, lighting another cigarette he had fitted into the long ivory holder.

Shaman Song looked around the room. In addition to three sharp-eyed men watching the

surveillance screens at a long table, there were three blue-suited, muscular bodyguards with shoulder holsters bulging and coats unbuttoned, their unflinching eyes fixed on Song. Two of the guards stood on either side of Ling's desk, and the third was positioned behind the shaman, next to the door.

"No, sir," Song continued. "Must wait for water to recede. Keep tail dry. As long as Owl Man active, water too high."

"This so-call Owl Man," began Ling. "Sound like he worry you."

"Excuse, please, but no one worry Shaman Song. Owl Man think big lion thoughts, but act like sheep. One easy bite from Song enough to bring him down."

"What about China? You forget China?"

The shaman hesitated, shifting his weight imperceptibly and flexing the muscles in his calves. His pupils shrank.

"China bad luck. Wrong time. Song never forget. Never happen again."

Old Man Ling gazed steadily at the shaman through narrow slits, smoke curling up through his Fu Manchu mustache and obscuring the single gray hair that sprouted from the crown of his head. There was never any way of knowing what Old Man Ling was thinking. The police and FBI had even employed forensic psychics to pry open the strongbox of that closed mind, but without result. Song, for all his shamanic prowess, knew it was hopeless to try. He stood and waited.

"My people tell me this Owl Man plan heist on Ling Bank. My people watch him and lotus blossom girlfriend. And fat one on boat. And other bird-man—crane, maybe. Owl Man already mess with bank video system. Stop time. They practice old bird-trance feather method. Much trouble for Ling."

"I stop him, Master Ling. Song know how."

"Shaman Song sorry piece of shit!" roared Old Man Ling, slamming his fist on the desk. The crystal ashtray jumped and the bodyguards tensed, their thick hands drifting to the bulges in their coats. "Owl Man plan something soon!" he continued to shout. "Song worthless idiot!" After an awkward silence, Old Man Ling calmed down enough to continue. "But Ling have better plan."

For all his unearthly composure, Shaman Song was growing apprehensive in Old Man Ling's presence. He lowered his head as Ling spoke.

“Listen good, piece of shit. We pull own heist first. Owl Man get there, try heist but money gone. No money for Owl, ha, ha! We call police, give them Owl description. Insurance pay for loss. Double payday for us, ha, ha!” Old Man Ling, smiling proudly at the ingenuity of his plan, puffed on his cigarette holder and looked to his bodyguards for affirmation. They were smiling broadly, left and right, nodding to their boss and each other. “Good plan, boss, damn good plan,” they all agreed.

One of the security camera watchers leaned toward his monitor for a closer look. “Uh oh, boss,” he said. “Maybe trouble here. Come look.” The two other watchers rolled their chairs over to look at the first man’s screen. Soon Old Man Ling, Shaman Song and all six bodyguards were crowded around the one security monitor wired to a camera aimed at a corner table in the main dining room. From that angle, they could plainly see a couple sitting with their heads together.

“So?” said Old Man Ling. “What big deal?”

It was Shaman Song, not the monitor lackey, who answered.

“Look closer, Mr. Ling. Big man with hair like feathers, big eyes. That Owl Man.”

“Yes, yes. Hmmm. Owl Man. First time see. Very impressive. What he doing here? This place big trouble for him.” Old Man Ling took another look. “And who the girl?”

Shaman Song nervously scratched the skin on first one wrist then another, before replying, “That his *lotus blossom girl*.”

“What her name?” demanded Ling, almost shouting again.

Song hesitated before muttering, “Her name ... Jasmine.”

Old Man Ling scrutinized the couple on the screen for a few moments. Then he slowly turned to Shaman Song and said, “Darkness no match for light of beauty. Tail of little fox getting wet. How you gonna dry it now, Mr. Bigshot Shaman?”

Hexagram #24: Turning Back ...

Owl Man reached across the table and puts his large hands on Jasmine's head and pulled her toward him. Into her ear he whispers, "Stare steadily at the camera, the one in the center of the ceiling pointed at us. Don't say anything, just smile in all the wonderful ways you do. Don't blink. And don't say a word."

Letting go of Jasmine's diminutive head, and leaning back, he stares at Jasmine looking at the ceiling camera. He takes a long sip of his oolong tea and begins.

"Shaman Song and Mr. Ling. Good evening. I know you can hear me so listen carefully. First, let me say, how delightful your oolong is. I've never tasted better. My hat's off to you. We shall not be staying long so we will miss your culinary delights, sad to say, perhaps another time. I've come to warn you. I know you will take my warning seriously, especially you, Shaman Song, considering our last encounter. And Mr. Ling, be aware I am fully cognizant of your fraudulent plan. That is of no concern to me. Any reports you make to authorities Heron Man and I can undo in a simple re-write."

Owl Man paused to let this message sink in. Taking another long and languid savoring taste of the rare oolong, a wide smile appeared as he turned and faced the ceiling spy. He continued.

"What concerns me, Shaman Song, is that any interference on your part in our efforts to fully test the transpositional effort will have unknown and possibly unsafe consequences not only for us but for you as well. Your revenge-filled plan may not have fully considered this possibility—hence my appearance tonight in your lair. Mr. Ling, I don't think you are aware of Shaman Song's propensity for slip-up. You will be endangered as well if he goes through with his plan to subvert our experiment."

Owl Man paused again, turning back around and reaching for Jasmine's hand, which he placed between his own. Looking at her looking at them, he continued.

"Mr. Ling, our purpose should not concern you. We will follow through on the heist, but as soon as we know the experiment is a success, Ling Bank shall be made whole again. So I advise not to carry out your own misguided fraud, as you will only end up getting yourself not just in hot water, but drowning in it as well. Not a good fate. Now please send us a waiter with

your response.”

A few moments passed and a waiter, handsomely attired in black velvet pants and white silk shirt, carrying an antique silver plate bearing a folded white paper, set the plate on the table and retreated. Owl Man took up the note, unfolded it, and read it aloud to Jasmine.

“No deal, Owl. Now you and your Lotus Blossom leave at once or I will see to it your feathers are scattered to the high winds.”

Owl Man stood up and as Jasmine joined him, he pulled her close and hugged her. Once again he whispered in her ear.

“We must meet with Heron Man at once.”

Hexagram 29: Dangerous Depths—The Pit of Death ...

Owl Man re-folded the curt message Old Man Ling had sent, and, in one continuous motion, slipped it into his coat pocket while withdrawing a ten-dollar bill, which he tossed onto the table. They'd had no dinner tonight, but Owl's standard policy was to tip well anyway, leaving the wait-staff happier than he found them. The moment he and Jasmine turned to leave, however, the entire restaurant was abruptly cast into darkness, as if an unseen electrician had cut the power to the building. The clatter and murmur of the crowded restaurant came to a stop as the patrons looked around, blinking blindly in search of a cause.

Owl Man whispered to Jasmine, "Would you say this rises to the level of Stygian darkness, my dear? Or is this just a normal metropolitan brown-out?"

"Are you kidding me, Owlie?" said Jasmine, digging her fingernails into Owl's arm. "Old Man Ling just threatened to 'scatter our feathers', and now this happens. And I don't believe it's a coincidence. What's going on?"

Owl Man was well aware of Shaman Song's arsenal of cheap tricks, like this shamanic "Pit-of-Death" power outage. He was also familiar with any dangers such tricks may or may not have represented. Leaning into Jasmine's ear, he whispered calmly, "Just think of this as water moving past, Jaz, that's all. It's nothing we haven't faced before in one form or another. This is Shaman Song's way of trying to frighten us, so the last thing we want to do is yield to fear. That's where his so-called 'power' comes from. He frightens people, but he cannot frighten us."

When Jasmine heard these words from Owl, a sudden calm descended over her, an inner-warmth rising. Yet just a moment before, she had only felt an uncanny chill.

"Should we make our way out while it's still dark, Owlie, or what? Do you have a flashlight?"

"Don't have one, Jaz, don't need one—I've got you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you only have to push the fear away and smile, and I guarantee we'll have light enough to navigate by."

And thus it happened. Jasmine swallowed once, looked in Owl Man's direction, and smiled. As she did, a radiant light began to emanate from her, reflecting off the faces of nearby customers. She and the Owl moved forward, their pathway illumined as if by moonlight.

Upstairs, in Old Man Ling's office, Ling and his flunkies stared at the phosphorescent-like glow moving across the monitor screen. The luminous mass was headed toward the door.

“大象爆炸式的拉肚子,” shouted Shaman Song bitterly, using his favorite vulgar Chinese expletive.

“笨天生的一堆肉,” shot back Old Man Ling in a cutting reply.

“Owl not scare so easy, Mr. Bigshot!” mocked Ling, lapsing back into his broken English.

“Owl Man not know what danger he in,” said Song, trying to salvage some respect.

“You listen good!” growled Old Man Ling, his jowls quivering. “Song use old-fashioned ‘Pit-of-Death’ spell too many time. Darkness don’t work no more. This big Owl not hide, this Owl *learn from danger!* See? Owl and Lotus Blossom—they walk right out of Rim of Fire, easy, like water move over big rock, big hole. Water not afraid of Pit-of-Death, no problem—just fill up, overflow, and move on. Water always go back to source. No fear.”

Shaman Song glared at the insulting shapes as they glided across the dark screen.

Once outside the Rim of Fire, Owl Man put his arm around Jasmine and filled his lungs with chilly Seattle air. “Ahhhh!” he said with relish, “wonderful night, Jaz! And look at you, my dear, putting the full moon to shame!”

“Mr. Owl, please,” said Jasmine. “Do not wax too poetic—lest *you* put the *moon* to shame.”

“Very well, then, my love,” said Owl Man. “But hie thee, lass. We must meet with the Heron at once. I suspect we’ll have to tear him away from his night-fishing!”

Owl Man Interrupts Heron's Night-Fishing ...

Owl Man's loud rapping on Heron's door brought shushing sounds from Jasmine.

"Owlie, you're gonna wake the dead!"

"Or worse," Owl Man replied, feathers unruffled.

"Worse? What could be worse?"

"Don't ask, little flower, you'll know soon enough if my hunch be right."

The door opened a crack then was flung wide, as Heron, with arms around Helen, bowed and gestured for Owl and Jasmine to enter.

"And to what do we owe this late night call?" Heron's voice held an edge of distemper, no doubt resulting from disruption of what Owl had called Heron's "night fishing."

"Apologies for the intrusion but we must deal with Shaman Song, and the sooner the better."

"Do you need us for this?" Helen and Jasmine raised the question together.

"No. You ladies go do lady things. Heron and I will do what's necessary."

Jasmine and Helen both snorted at the "sexist" remark, not having seen the twinkle in Owl Man's eyes. He sank into the overstuffed chair and Heron perched on the couch, as "the ladies" went off down the hall.

"What do you think Shaman Song will do, Owl?"

"I've only heard rumors, Heron. But since my last encounter with Shaman Song I hear he has developed a most insidious curse. He calls it 'Trapped in Bones.'"

"How does it work?"

"Somehow he is able to call up skeletons, from where I don't know, and the skeleton bones then come apart and pile up forming a kind of case that traps those inside. I hear it's impossible to dislodge the bones. Eventually, those inside suffocate."

"Can you stop it?"

"As you know, Heron, the first time confronting a curse is always the worst, because the counter-energies are not immediately knowable. I'm not sure I can. I think we need a volunteer before the heist, so I can work out the counter measure."

"And, this volunteer, you're suggesting is—"

"Yes, Heron, I can't trust anyone except you."

A Convenient Tooth ...

Heron Man's eyes assumed the dimensions of an owl's—so wide you wondered how they could fit in their sockets. And those pupils—like the diaphragms on NASA's finest space cameras! When you combined these light-gathering qualities with the *tapetum lucidum*—the reflective layer of cells at the back of an owl's or a heron's eyes—then you ended up with night-vision as acute as an X-ray.

That's how Heron Man's eyes pierced the sodium-vapor dimness behind the parking lot of the Rim of Fire—like scanning X-ray beams. Thus, to the heron it was clear as day: there were no guards outside the building, lurking in the door-wells or behind power-poles. And if there happened to be any night-vision security cameras, which Heron Man was counting on, it's doubtful that the bored guards in Ling's office, staring fixedly at the monochromatic monitors twelve hours a day, would have seen the liquid shadow oozing across the parking lot, slipping between the Caddies, Mercedes and Porsches, coming to a halt behind a massive black Hummer.

Heron Man looked up at the windows to Old Man Ling's office, where he could see the back of Ling's shiny head, the elbow of one of the bodyguards, and, pacing back and forth in front of Old Man Ling's desk, Shaman Song—the source of so much recent trouble.

Heron thought: If I am going to serve as Owl Man's sacrificial guinea pig by being the first to confront Shaman Song's *Trapped in Bones* spell, then I might as well get on with it. Much depends on what I learn tonight. But if I remain too well-cloaked, Song won't know I'm here. So, I need to announce myself to him and let him begin his trick.

Whereupon Heron Man stood up straight, extended his neck, and flapped his arms as if driving off excess water. Next he shook his head, emitting in the process a loud croaking sound: *Awwwwwwwk!* Then he repeated it for good measure. *Awwwwwwwk!!*

The eerie bird-sound had the desired effect. Shaman Song stopped his pacing and practically flew to the window behind Old Man Ling. Craning his head back and forth, the shaman surveyed the parking lot below, finally spotting the source of the disturbance—a dark shadow, billowing slightly against the still darker background. When combined with the dimly sulphurous light cast by the parking lot's sodium-vapor flood-lamps, the effect was a roiling, nauseating darkness, like a pit of black snakes. Yet even when Song squeezed his eyelids tightly

to activate his “far-see” mode, he couldn’t distinguish anything specific about the form that loomed out of the background.

But Song was intuitive enough to know that he was under attack, so he launched his counter-attack mode by stepping into a utility broom closet, closing the door and settling into a sitting position. There he began chanting aloud while moving his arms—taking care not to knock the scouring cleanser off its wire shelf.

Heron Man was still flapping his arms when the first bone—a crusty old femur with brown stains on it—fell into place.

“So, it begins,” he uttered aloud.

He started to issue a challenge to Shaman Song when the second bone landed—Heron could not see where it came from—this one a tibia, perhaps, bleached sun-white and brittle. On came the bones, in a clattering crescendo, until Heron man could feel them piling against his legs, his hips, his chest and chin.

“Good God,” said Heron, “how many bones have you got, Shaman Song?”

Scarcely a minute passed before Heron Man was completely engulfed in a pile of bones that began melting into one huge block of calcium hydroxylapatite. Heron Man’s breathing became more labored, as the fusion of bone-substances proceeded. Soon he was gasping. This was no joke, he thought, not having enough breath to give voice.

Then, with his night-vision he saw a glimmer in the darkness. On the inner face of the bony sarcophagus where Heron was trapped, there gleamed the shiny enamel of a single canine tooth, projecting into the interior. The enamel on this tooth was so hard that it was going to take some time for the fusion process to complete itself.

Writhing in a serpentine manner, Heron Man managed to move his neck just enough to clasp the long, refractory tooth between his own teeth. Clenching his jaws he bit down as hard as he could and forced his head backward, drawing the lucky tooth toward him. With a crunching sound the tooth popped free of its matrix and a jet of fresh air shot into the interior cavity, following a long fracture the obdurate tooth had created in the otherwise solidifying block of bone.

“Whew,” whispered Heron Man. “That was close.”

Having emerged from the broom closet, Shaman Song saw a dim glow emanating from the congealing block of solid bone, and he was sure he had succeeded in trapping Heron Man in

the ingenious snare.

“Ha, ha, Mr. Ling, you look now, please,” boasted Shaman Song. “Bigshot Heron Man caught in Song’s new trap. Call *Trapped in Bones*—Song’s big-deal trance.”

Old Man Ling swiveled around to see for himself. Standing up and placing his nose against the slightly fogged window, Ling just stared silently for a few moments. As his eyes acclimated to the murky darkness, he saw a black thread of inky vapor issuing from a crack in the block. Soon it had swarmed out and formed something like a body, having increased enormously in size. Then it raised two wing-like extensions on either side and began flapping them in unison. The black shadow lifted up and away from the gruesome block, rising over the rows of cars and veering toward the building, where it flared against the lighted window and out of sight.

Ling squinted his already squinty eyes and turned to glare at Song, who still wasn’t sure what had just happened.

“Trap sprung. Rabbit gone. Hunter go to hut empty-handed,” said Ling ominously. “You got one more chance, big shot. Mess up again, you end up bag of bones in concrete block this time, bottom Elliott Bay.”

The pulsing shadow glided over nighttime Seattle, wings beating like a heartbeat. Once it reached Jasmine’s apartment building, the bird-form flourished its wings like a cloak, landed at the foot of the stairs, and simultaneously unfolded and levered itself up to the entrance.

Three sharp raps rattled Jasmine’s door, and Owl Man sprang to open it. Heron Man practically fell into his arms. Jasmine rushed over and the two of them dragged Heron Man to the upholstered chair. He sank into it with a long, shuddering sigh.

Owl Man looked at him with concern and said, “Mission accomplished, I take it?”

Heron Man first took a deep breath, but finally nodded, then replied, “Where’s the Macallan?”