

Science Fiction and Fantasy Promo Sampler

Compliments of **Twilight Times Books**

We are pleased to present chapter excerpts from a variety of our science fiction and fantasy books for your reading pleasure. Plus, you will find an ebook in its entirety, **Jerome and the Seraph** by Robina Williams.

Twilight Times Books was established January 1999 as an epubliher. "In 2004, we evolved from an Internet epubliher to a small press print publisher. TT Books is currently expanding into paperback books and will be seeking new distributors for both ebooks and print books in the coming months," according to a recent interview with publisher Lida E. Quillen.

Due to an exceptional front list of books, all with four star reviews, the print division of Twilight Times Books launched twenty-one titles in trade paperback last year. Books are distributed internationally through Baker & Taylor, Ingram and online booksellers.

From our inception, we have established standards of excellence and our goal is to provide an outlet for brilliant authors whose work has exceptional literary merit and to get those books into the hands of readers.

What people are saying about Twilight Times Books:

Top Rating of 10 from Harriet Klausner

"...**Jerome and the Seraph** is a simple entertaining book that ironically connects complex topics (the afterlife, mythology, and quantum physics) into a wonderful fantasy that hooks readers from the moment Al and Jerry exchange a few words. The tale never lets go until Brother Jerome completes his journeys, though Quant steals the show. Fans who appreciate an amusing with serious undertone adventure tale will appreciate Jerome Through the Looking Glass guided by Quant the Cheshire cat." Reviewed by Harriet Klausner for MBR Bookwatch.

"...**Monkey Trap** is full of twists and turns, undercurrents and subplots, technical and scientific detail and jargon that under the talented hands of this father-daughter writing team will enthrall any Sci-fi fan. ...this trade paperback, with its artistic cover design, quality paper and print, is a two thumbs up must read bookshelf keeper. Don't miss Lee Denning's MONKEY TRAP." Reviewed by Charlene Austin for Writers and Readers Network.

Monkey Trap. "...The first volume in a projected trilogy presents a cast of convincing characters and a compellingly paced plot. Denning, the pseudonym of a father-daughter writing team, uses quick changes of scene and character-building flashbacks to create an sf adventure that combines hard science, mysticism, and alien contact. For most libraries." *Library Journal* (the Sci Fi column by Jackie Cassada).

Strange Valley. "...A city where residents don't get married and show no religious preference? What will happen to our cherished American values? Logically, Masterville becomes an imminent threat. Whether this scenario is a parody of our present government situation, the reader will have to decide.

Definitely a good story. The first chapter is fascinating and the subsequent ones maintain a high tempo of action and suspense that will keep you curious to the end. The science is believable and intelligently written. This book also deals with issues worth pondering. Darrell Bain is a name I will keep my eye on for future reviews. Five stars."

Reviewed by Mayra Calvani for *The Midwest Book Review*.

Strange Valley. "...Using hyperbole to highlight the extreme of the fundamentalist religious right movement, Darrell Bain provides a powerful political thriller. The story line showcases a central government that feels so strongly in the end state of Christian based federalism that it leads the people to a restrictive faith in which the means to get there do not matter. This includes beating the bushes to thwart a small town whose residents are living together in harmony as that is not necessarily a pious life style. This reviewer kept thinking of the bane imposed on Rushdie as this strong thriller with a powerful message leaves readers to ponder what is right. Darrell Bain has written a fabulous eye-opening tale."

Reviewed by Harriet Klausner for *Baryon*.

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Science Fiction and Fantasy Promo Sampler

Excerpt from **Angelos** *literary fantasy*

By Robina Williams

Chapter One

As he passed through the porch for the last time, Father Fidelis sensed that he was under scrutiny. He turned sharply and saw the friary cat, a ginger tom, sitting on a bench, watching him. He eyed the cat uncertainly. The creature stared solemnly at him for a few moments, then his green eyes glittered and brightened, and Fidelis caught a gleam of gold. He surprised himself by stooping to stroke the cat.

“Hi, Leo! Have you come to say goodbye to me?”

Father Peter, who was standing by the doorway, clutching Fidelis’s suitcase, grimaced and held his breath as he waited for the cat to claw Fidelis, for the two had never gotten along. Fidelis didn’t like cats and didn’t bother to hide the fact. Peter had seen him aim a kick at Leo one day — and had seen the deep and bloody scratch his guardian had received in return. Cursing cats in general and Leo in particular, Fidelis had limped off to bandage his ankle.

Now, to Peter’s amazement, Leo gave a friendly-sounding meow and pushed his head encouragingly into the friar’s palm.

Fidelis was plainly taken aback by this sudden display of affection. Cautiously, he patted the silken head. The cat purred invitingly. Fidelis patted him again, then caressed his soft fur. Leo purred happily.

Fidelis smiled. It was the first time Peter had seen him smile in weeks.

“Well, how about that!” Fidelis said with some bemusement. “We’re buddies now.” He laughed, and added, “Unless, of course, he knows I’m leaving and he’ll be glad to see the back of me.” He gave Leo’s head a final pat.

The cat nuzzled him — a little ostentatiously, it seemed to Peter.

“Well, ‘bye, Leo, it’s time I was going. ‘Bye, old fellow.” Fidelis moved toward the open door, glanced back, then headed toward the waiting car, where Father Valentine sat ready to drive him to the railway station.

Before following his guardian outside, Peter stared suspiciously at the cat.

Green eyes gazed innocently back at him, then Leo bent to lick a paw. When he raised his head, his eyes had changed color.

Peter turned away as a rich, fiery gold burned into him. He had seen those golden eyes before. They had frightened him then, and they frightened him now. They belonged to a creature from another realm, a creature that possessed powers beyond his imagining. This cat could skip from the land of the living to the land of the dead and back again. This cat could dance through dimensions with ease, which was considerably more than Peter’s late brother-in-faith, Jerome, could do.

The late Brother Jerome, Peter had come to realize, wasn’t exactly resting in peace. Death had given

him itchy feet. Jerome, who had been a stay-at-home type during his lifetime, was now out and about all over the place. The only problem was that he didn't seem to have quite mastered the art of after-death travel. It appeared he still had a certain amount to learn about the technique.

* * *

It's only natural, he's not gotten the hang of it yet — he's not been dead for long. Peter paused and corrected himself. *No... it isn't natural.*

When a chap was meant to be lying quietly in his casket, it was no joke having him materialize out of the ether and give you the fright of your life. It was a grave matter when the dead wouldn't stay dead, or at least stay put.

As for the cat, well, the cat... who knew whether he was dead or alive? Life and death seemed to be all one to him, for he lived with the living and with the dead... at the same time.

Peter forced himself to look at the cat again and found himself looking into those green eyes once more. The golden fire that had blazed a moment earlier had been extinguished. There was nothing unusual about the eyes that regarded him now. They were just... cat's eyes. There was nothing special about them, nothing out of the ordinary.

Peter gulped, turned and went quickly out of the porch toward the waiting car. He found the cat in his incarnation as household pet profoundly disturbing, for he knew that the familiar exterior masked something strange, something *alien*. He was trembling as he carried Fidelis's suitcase to the car, and almost stumbled.

Valentine quickly left the driver's seat and hurried over to take the suitcase from him. He was surprised to find that it wasn't particularly heavy. He eyed Peter curiously. "Are you feeling okay?"

Peter turned an abstracted gaze on him. "What?"

"Is everything okay? You seem a bit... unsteady."

"I'm fine."

You don't look fine, Valentine thought as he stowed the suitcase in the trunk. *You look like someone who's seen a ghost. Ah...*

"You've seen something, haven't you?" he said excitedly.

Peter looked momentarily confused, then glanced toward the front of the car, where Fidelis was now sitting in the passenger seat, and frowned at Valentine.

"You'll tell me later?" Valentine whispered.

Peter nodded and went to wish his guardian a pleasant journey to his new home. He shook Fidelis's hand warmly. Though he had never really hit it off with Fidelis — the chemistry between them had not been quite right — he appreciated Fidelis's dedication to his task of looking after his friars, a task recently made more difficult by the unwelcome arrival of a visitor from the past. Now, Fidelis had been called away to serve elsewhere, and a new guardian was about to arrive.

Valentine walked round to the driver's door and seated himself once more in the car. He turned to his passenger. "Is that everything now? Is there anything else you'd like to take with you?"

"Nothing, thanks," Fidelis assured him. "I've everything I need. I'm traveling light." He smiled. It was a happy smile.

Fidelis did indeed appear to be traveling light — in more ways than one. While Valentine was not surprised that his guardian should be leaving with so little luggage — for what personal possessions did a friar vowed to poverty amass? — he *was* surprised that Fidelis should be leaving with such a light heart. Not only was he off to a tough new posting, exchanging a quiet rural parish for a troubled inner city parish whose priest had gone awol in scandalous circumstances, but he was forsaking a close personal friendship — to put it no higher than that — yet he seemed to have no regrets; in fact he

looked as if he couldn't wait to be on his way.

Valentine watched his guardian give a final wave to Peter and the other friars who had come to wish him well.

You have to hand it to him, he thought admiringly. A word from the Provincial, and he's packed his bag, ready to leave. There's obedience for you! He's an example to us all.

As he pulled away down the drive, he glanced in his mirror and saw that the cat had joined the assembled friars watching the departing car.

As Peter turned to go back into the friary, he noticed the cat standing beside him, and bent to stroke him. Though deeply uneasy in the cat's presence, he was anxious to show him that he wanted them to be friends. *Well, it's only sensible to be on good terms with such a creature.*

As if reading his mind, and being ready for a petting, the cat purred and led the way back to the porch. He jumped once more onto one of the benches lining the walls and meowed encouragingly.

Peter took the hint and sat down beside him. As he stroked the smooth fur, he remembered the cat's unexpected show of affection toward Fidelis a few minutes earlier. It had been so obvious as to be unmissable.

Maybe, as Fidelis had jokingly surmised, the animal had known he was leaving and had been expressing his pleasure at seeing the back of him. Yet somehow Peter didn't think so. The cat's display of good will had seemed to be genuine. It was as if Leo had wanted Fidelis to know that he, for his part, had put their differences behind him. *Time to let bygones be bygones* had been his unmistakable message.

So unmistakable as to be... what was the word that had sprung into his mind earlier? Ostentatious. Yes, that was it. The cat's display of affection had been ostentatious. Theatrical.

Theatrical... hmm. Peter remembered that that word had occurred to him after the scene in the cemetery. The dramatic reappearance of the late Father Egbert and the late Brother Jerome had been completely overshadowed by the even more dramatic vanishing act performed by the cat.

As he stroked the creature's furry back, Peter relived the episode in the graveyard. He watched the ghost of Egbert, seemingly exasperated with the posthumous wanderings of his brother-in-spirit, turn to the cat and wave a hand despairingly in Jerome's direction. He heard him say to the cat, "Do something about him. Please!" He watched Leo step over the coping stone and onto the grave, as if answering the plea, and join the two apparitions. Then the cat had looked archly, teasingly, across at him out of blazing golden eyes, as if to say, "Watch this!" — knowing he was about to dazzle him with a display of his powers — had stretched out a paw, for all the world as if he had been holding a magic wand, and had simply disappeared along with the two ghosts.

He had vanished. Just like that. And his vanishing had been far more frightening than the vanishing of the two ghosts, for ghosts are known for disappearing — it's expected of them, part of their job — but flesh-and-blood cats aren't. Yet this cat had disappeared. One moment he was there, the next he was gone.

Yet, a few minutes later, on returning to the friary, he had found Leo sitting on a bench in the porch, washing his paws as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Peter recalled how he had collapsed onto the bench himself and had nervously run his hand along the animal's back, half-expecting his hand to pass through the fur. But he had found himself stroking the fur of a flesh-and-blood cat. There had been nothing insubstantial about the creature, despite his having vanished into thin air a few minutes earlier.

Now, as then, Peter ran his fingers along the ridges of the cat's backbone, then slid his hand round to the silky chest and felt the steady, regular heartbeat. He patted Leo's head, then resumed stroking his smooth back. He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself, trying to slow his own frantic heartbeat.

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Then he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Peter's hand trembled as he petted the cat.

What kind of creature sat beside him? The cat seemed solid enough. He had bones and flesh and fur and a heartbeat. And yet he could magic himself away into nothingness.

Magic. Peter repeated the word to himself, and the more he thought about it, the more appropriate it seemed.

The cat had performed a magic trick when he had disappeared in the company of two ghosts. He had stepped onto the grave as if onto a stage, looked at his audience with an archness that had been quite actorly, stretched out a paw like a conjuror with a wand, and performed a piece of prestidigitation that had left the spectator gasping with disbelief. He had put on a show, starring himself and with a supporting company of ghosts. It had been a piece of pure theatre, lacking only a drum roll and fanfare.

The episode in the porch had been another piece of theatre. Peter reviewed the tableau — the cat sitting on the bench, with Fidelis standing uncertainly before him — and it occurred to him that there had been something a touch judicial about the proceedings. Maybe the cat's presence in the porch at the precise moment that Fidelis had been leaving the building for the last time had not been coincidental. Leo appeared to have a taste for drama: had he staged a final scene of judgment, pardon and reconciliation?

Peter wondered if he was letting his imagination run away with him. And yet, the cat had made a big show of making up with Fidelis before his departure; why, he had all but shaken hands with him and wished him all the best. Come to that, how had he known Fidelis was leaving for good, and not just going off on holiday for a few days? Certainly he *had* known: he had been saying goodbye and not *au revoir*.

Peter caressed the soft fur warily. He was mystified by the cat. He was mystified by Fidelis, too. He couldn't understand his guardian's eagerness to take up his new posting and his anxiety to be away.

Fidelis had wanted to be in his new parish as soon as possible. This had surprised them all, for he had become a frequent visitor to the new parishioner's cottage on the hillside — nothing unusual about that, perhaps, for he had always been regarded as a ladies' man. Yet when asked by the Provincial to take on the care of a difficult parish miles away, he had agreed instantly and had gone to pack his suitcase. His readiness to move on had impressed the friars. They would all have gone if asked, of course, but they wouldn't have wanted to, for who would choose to exchange a country parish for an inner city one, especially one in a state of turmoil, the circumstances being what they were?

It's all very curious, Peter thought. There was no telling with folk.

When Valentine returned from the station, he searched for Peter but could not find him, and discovered he had gone to celebrate Mass at the nearby convent in place of Fidelis, whose sudden departure had necessitated the drawing-up of an emergency rota for sacerdotal duties. He next saw him at teatime and did not have the chance for a private word with him, but whatever had troubled Peter earlier clearly no longer troubled him, for, his poise recovered, he sat laughing and joking with those around him.

The friars were looking forward to seeing their new guardian the next day, for they all remembered Father Aidan from previous postings and knew him to be an even-tempered, good-natured sort, who understood the value of harmony in a community such as theirs, where people had to get along together or they all suffered. While not as charismatic as Fidelis undoubtedly was, Aidan was easy to get on with. He had been a guardian before, and a popular one, for he allowed those in his charge space of their own. He gave them room, and it was appreciated. They chatted eagerly about his impending arrival.

Mid-morning, a battered red station wagon drew up outside the front door of the friary. It was a car that had had a number of drivers, for it had been passed around various friars within the Order before being allocated to its current owner, and its many dents and scratches bore witness to their differing levels of skill. Aidan walked round to lift his luggage from the wayback.

Father Oliver, glancing out of a window, noticed the vehicle and hurried outside. Beaming at his new guardian, he picked up the suitcases and waited for Aidan to lock the car. "It's good to see you again," he said warmly, his round, rubicund face lit with pleasure. He ushered his guardian into the friary. "I'll show you to your room." As they made their way along the corridor, he inquired, "Did you have a good trip?"

"It wasn't too bad, thanks." Aidan sounded rather weary. "There were a few slowdowns on the way. Did Fidelis get away all right yesterday?"

Oliver nodded. "Yes, he caught the train at three o'clock. He left his car here, of course. You'll probably want to use it yourself — it's a new one. It's very nice," he added admiringly. "I've driven it a few times."

"I don't need a new car," Aidan said sharply. "The one I have will do fine. It's old, but there's nothing wrong with it. It gets me from A to B."

"Oh, er, right." Oliver, taken aback at the asperity of his tone, let the subject drop. It sounded as if Aidan thought a new car was a luxury they didn't need. Glumly, he pushed open the door to Aidan's room and stood aside politely as his guardian entered.

Aidan looked around impassively and said nothing.

Oliver deposited the suitcases on the bed, and, wondering if his guardian's silence indicated dissatisfaction with the accommodation, walked briskly to the door at the far end of the room, flung it open with a flourish and announced proudly, "Your ensuite shower room."

Again, he failed to meet with the reaction he had been expecting.

Aidan strode across to inspect the area, but far from expressing his appreciation of the facilities, asked tartly, "How long has this been here?"

"Erm, about a year," Oliver said. Hesitantly, he added, "We all have them."

"Do you now?" Aidan remarked frostily. "That must have cost the Order a pretty penny."

"A local chap installed them for us," Oliver said miserably. "I don't think he charged a lot."

"Well, I think I'll be having a look at the accounts," Aidan said, the frost in his voice having turned to ice.

"Er, right." Oliver shuffled his feet unhappily. He wondered what to say next. After a short silence he ventured, "Can I get you anything? A cup of tea? Coffee?"

"Nothing, thanks. I'll get unpacked, then I'll be down to see you all." Aidan glanced at his watch. "You still have prayers at noon, I take it?"

"Oh, yes," Oliver assured him enthusiastically.

"Good. You all attend, of course?"

"Of course." Oliver edged toward the door. "Well, if there's nothing you need for the moment, I'll, er, get back downstairs."

"I'll see you later," Aidan said. "Thanks for fetching my luggage."

"You're welcome. It's nice to see you again. I'll let the chaps know you're here." Oliver shut the door quietly. He groaned to himself as he made his way back along the corridor. This wasn't the Aidan they had been expecting. What had happened to the man? He seemed to have had some sort of personality change. Was he ill? Something was up with him, for sure.

Oliver's usually cheerful face was gloomy as he quickened his pace and made for the lounge. He'd

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better get the chaps rounded up and into the chapel, ready for prayers at noon. He just hoped everyone was in; he suspected, though, that one or two of the friars had gone out for the day. Oh dear, it looked as if life was going to be a bit harsher than it had been under Fidelis; he had a nasty feeling that stricter times lay ahead.

A delicious smell of food cooking wafted toward him from the direction of the kitchen and Oliver remembered that Ignatius was preparing a special lunch to welcome Aidan. *Oh dear*, he thought again. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to greet their new guardian with a slap-up meal. Oliver groaned aloud. Good food was one of the pleasures of life, and Ignatius was a divine cook. He hoped Aidan wasn't against eating — he seemed to be against just about everything else. The omens weren't good. He sighed as he turned toward the lounge. Passing the friary cat sunning himself on a windowsill, he paused to stroke him.

The cat remained where he was for a moment or two, then yawned and jumped down. He sniffed appreciatively, licked his whiskers and padded along toward the kitchen.

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Robina lives in north-west England, in a village in Cheshire. She has an honours degree in Modern Languages from Oxford University, and a Master of Philosophy research degree in English Literature from Liverpool University. Her research thesis was on the relationship between Wilkie Collins and nineteenth-century art. Robina is very fond of English nineteenth-century painting.

Ms. Williams has taught French, Latin and English in schools and colleges. She has been a freelance features writer, with regular weekly and monthly columns. Robina has also been a secretary in a university and a computer data clerk in a hospital.

Jerome and the Seraph is the first book she has written. She has recently completed a sequel, **Angelos**.

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Excerpt from **Behold the Eyes of Light**
Epic fantasy

By Geoff Geauterre

Chapter One

She awakened just before dawn, troubled, eyes narrowed, teeth bared. It was yet another night of dizzying dreams. She shook her head tiredly. This had to be the seventh time it happened and it was making her uneasy. She'd tried meditation, fasting, and even a form of self-hypnosis, but it was no use. As a last resort she tried screaming at them, but they returned worse than ever.

She coughed in disgust. The most powerful of the clan having nightmares. Then a thought sent a chill right down to the tip of her tail. What would happen if others learned of it? She shuddered. If her mental stability was openly questioned that could be reason enough for a challenge, and the last time she was challenged for her position there'd been a killing. She didn't need anything like that now.

Thankfully, thoughtfully, her pair of mates had taken refuge in another den not too far away. There were times lately when she just needed to be by herself. Of course solitude didn't give her the relief she sought. What was happening to her? She was unapproachable, gruff, snarling and just four nights ago she came out of a deep sleep with claws unsheathed.

That was when her odd behavior became too much. Her mates looked at one another, coughed in disgust and stalked off. It was better for them to keep out of her fur, and besides, if she needed them all she had to do was grunt.

Yet on the seventh night of this torture, she couldn't take anymore, and rolling upright, she padded out into the star-lit chamber. She glanced around and wondered which direction offered a way to clear her mind. Maybe some fresh air?

Wearily she plodded upwards, paws treading softly in the silken sand, until finally she reached the cave entrance and took stock.

She was sorry she'd been such a mess lately. Her tail lashed out. Why couldn't she simply accept what she was and where she was and be done with it? Her teeth glinted in a silent snarl. Why were her dreams filled with impossible visions?

Golden green eyes fixed on the red tinted stars still visible in the sky. There was the trouble, right there. Right above her head. Those stars; she wanted them. It was as simple and as idiotic as that. She wanted the freedom they offered. She wanted to roam across the skies as she might her own territory. That was why her dreams plagued her so, beckoning her on and on.

Sitting still, tail curling neatly around, her mouth opened wide into a yawn, revealing great razor-sharp hunting teeth.

"Why do they draw me, so?" she asked of the night. "What is it about their glittering fire that makes my mind yearn?"

Behind her, unseen and unfelt, two pairs of eyes peered worriedly down from above. Both her mates shared the same troubled thoughts.

"There she is again, brother."

"I see."

“What can we do? Her distress grows, and with each day the danger of a challenge creeps closer. Many are beginning to sense this change in her.”

The other took a moment to consider carefully, teeth bared, glinting. “The clan has forgotten her gift. They forgot the day she vanished from one place and reappeared in another. They forgot the promise and the prophecy, and some have grown hungry waiting.”

So what do we do?”

The other shrugged. “We will wait, and watch, and protect. There is no other course for us.”

Then together they got up and turned, making their way back to their den. They would need all the rest they could get. By morning’s early light the northern branch of the pride would have to begin vacating the area. Those accepting the exchange of territories would come to inspect the holdings, each family taking part in the old, old ways.

Yet left behind was one whose thoughts were distractedly elsewhere. The matriarch of her pride sniffed at the air, her delicacy born of an aristocrat, her breeding and intelligence paramount in the way her eyes glowed, her head canted.

How did she get to this state? Her mouth dropped open in a chuckle. Simple: History. The history of a world where the climate grew more harsh every season; the history of a people, whose mental development seemed to have stopped a number of generations before; and her history, which was entwined within it like a knot in a tree.

A history where, as a kit, she’d been playing a game of tag and lost her footing, and had tumbled onto a shale-like slide overlooking the edge of a bottomless pit. She paused, remembering all too well.

Instinctively she cried out, and the other kits cried out too. The deep, endless looking drop lifted the back of their necks. The slide thrust into the side of a slippery runoff. It was far too unstable for her to climb, and too risky for anyone else to claw down to her to pull her up.

Her mother heard what was happening and rushed to the spot, perceiving immediately the deadly predicament. “Get up and out of there this very instant!” she’d screamed.

There was a hush of astonishment, as she melted into nothingness from the promised death in the rocks . . . and reappeared, shivering and crying, at her mother’s side. Without a sound the great cats, who had been drawn by the cries, knelt and whispered among themselves.

That’s where it all began, she grunted sourly. That’s when the story started.

When the Great One of their clan heard what had happened, she assembled her two mates and their best warriors, marched to the entryway of the den of the kit’s family and demanded entrance.

When she was admitted, she hurried to the burrow where the kit was feverishly sleeping, and with an extended claw touched her upon the brow, searching through the other’s preadolescent mind for an image of that moment, and when it came, she, too, was forced to kneel in the sand.

“So,” she whispered hoarsely, “the legend is true.” The others murmured thoughtfully, wonderingly, “The legend . . .” they said. “And when she comes of age,” the Great One declared, “she will take my place as our She of the North, and those of my bloodline will follow those of hers, and from this then comes our legacy.”

That night, her mother, her mates, and the elders sat around the entryway to the cave and looked about them as if the world were a different place. They did not know how or when the great change would come, the Great Change that a seer far in the past had foretold, but now they knew that it would, and they knew who would bring it to them. ‘For there will be a kit, as unlike any other, and She will bring us up from the hunt!’

But years would pass and the miracle of that moment only happened once, and as the kit became

a leader of the Ooroomoorii, became their She of the North, she too waited for a sign . . . a sign that seemed to take its own sweet time.

Then other matters took predominance. The pressures of running a great clan, the problems dealing with an ever-fretful growing number of crises made her tasks—even on a daily basis—more and more difficult to handle.

The questions she asked herself never seemed to have any answers. The people had developed mind to mind communication, and some even had the rare seer talent, but all were merely aspects of the same. The ability to communicate. Why no further? Why did it seem as if the race had come to a standstill?

What was really expected of her? She couldn't help the climate, or game becoming scarce, or water-holes drying up unexpectedly.

Was she supposed to be their sole means of deliverance? If so, how was she going to manage that?

These questions plagued her more and more often, and even now, here on this ridge, scowling into the darkness, she couldn't escape the fear that gnawed at her. What if she never discovered the answers? What if she was doomed to fail?

Of course, there were alternatives. They could begin hunting the great six-legged beasts in the higher northern areas, in the forests, or the mountain ranges, but she cringed at the idea. Those animals were dangerous. If they were annoyed enough, they could end up hunting you.

What about stalking the slim, weak creatures that flew in the tree lands? Yes, they could do that . . . but something about that idea made her feel a bit queasy. There was something about those creatures, the way they would pause, and look at you, that made her feel . . . they shouldn't be thought of as food either.

As the leader of her clan, she tried to subtly implement changes to help her people cope with the diminishing resources, but in some areas they remained intractable. It was their feeling that because 'She' was leading them, they had nothing to fear, and eventually all their problems would be solved.

But all their problems were not something she could snap a tail at and make go away. It was the result of over-harvesting, over-population and underestimating the danger signs. And the worst of it was losing their sense of awareness of the changing world around them. They were going to be caught short and she knew it.

It was also affecting her health. Half the time the stress of it all made it seem as if she were going to fall on her face, and several people began suggesting that she 'take it easy.' But she didn't just 'need a rest,' she needed answers. She shook her head.

Some thought she was going mad, especially when she started talking about 'herding' animals instead of 'hunting' them. Also, her proposal to lower birth rates? Didn't she know having kits was the true source of a clan's wealth?

Worse yet was when she raised the idea of redistributing territory, not by family holdings, but by family needs. Then there was her odd notion of collecting the hunted into packs and managing their growth? Or water conservation? Or moving a number of their clan in a sort of rotation of the territory?

She shuddered recalling the overall response: 'It would be the end of their way of life'; 'It would weaken the hunting instinct that was their birthright'; 'It would signal a need for a change in the hierarchy . . .' and that remark was the one that put her on notice.

Yet she knew that if something wasn't done, the very existence of Her Pride would be in jeopardy. Thus, with the instincts of an intelligent hunter looking for a way out of a dilemma, her questioning

started the process of logically seeking other means of dealing with seemingly insoluble problems. It was a daunting task.

What it came down to was this: the only way they could attempt to manipulate their environment successfully was through their ability to communicate mind to mind with everyone. That was a problem. There was an unwillingness to let down too many barriers. Besides that, each family and clan had secrets they did not wish to share.

Which raised another question: How was she going to convince a bunch of suspicious cats to cooperate with one another? On the surface the idea that their way of life was in jeopardy didn't seem credible. If she was the only one who saw a need for change, why change anything at all?

After months of discussions, where the struggle to uncover certain startling truths forced intransigent minds to appalling conclusions, it became clear change was inevitable. It was the only way they could hope to survive a shared predicament.

Thus finally, deliberate and sensitive negotiations among the most important members of the four great clans began, and crouched down in the Great Circle, they began to scheme how they might conserve what they had and prepare an entire race for restructuring. In her heart though, she knew it was too late.

Too much damage had been done by countless generations of neglect, and as the bones of long dead animals proved, when a species ran out of time, or when it was no longer tolerated, you were removed by the great claws of Nature and that was the end.

It was to be nothing less than a choice of wisdom over stupidity. She snorted. But if that failed, what was supposed to be her legacy? To battle destiny and see what came of it?

Her tufted ears twisted, casting for the sounds a feline hunter loves. The scurrying of a woods mouse; the rush of wings; the stamp of some beast in the tree line; the slithering leather-like slide of an eelskin creeping up the side of a swamp vine.

She looked round, then up. She could distinguish them all as no other hunter in the clan was capable of doing. Shouldn't those skills have been enough for her? But they weren't. She wanted to hear the burning howl of a star screaming in silent space. She wanted to know the turns of the dreaded sea beast in its deepest caverns. She wanted to be able to—and her mouth dropped open in an excited pant—to fly. To be one with the surging planet's breath when it moans with every crying twist it makes in the heavens.

Still, to be fair, she had been most fortunate. She couldn't have chosen two better males to father her kits. Both slightly older than her, but both handsome, brave, and cautious in the hunt. With their unstinting aid she'd been able to raise a fine pride, and a few of the younglings were even becoming mature enough to have dens of their own.

She had a right to be proud, having done what was expected of her, but still, she craved for more. She stared into the darkness, the eye of her mind casting itself across the realm of race memory. They'd come a long way, but not far enough. Not nearly far enough. Troubled, she turned and loped for the high ridge. There was someone she needed to see. Someone who could help her, if he would.

Several hours later, at the foot of the deep incline of a distant cave mouth, she spat in respect, crouched down and coughed. "Elder? Elder are you within?"

At first nothing, then the air seemed to part and a consciousness rose from deep in the earth. A quavering tone of a pure mind-thought emerged.

"Who are you?"

She tried a similar mind pattern in response, but something defeated her. "I am She," she replied softly. "She of the North, come to seek wisdom."

"I have nothing for you."

She blinked. "I am—refused?" Silence. "I've a great many questions!" Silence. "Have you nothing to offer?"

The thought that came then was direct. "Leave us."

She blinked again. Leave? Why should she leave? Also why did the Elder use a plural term? Which 'us' was he referring to? With a shake of the head she coughed indelicately.

"No!" She gouged out claw marks in the sand. "I need your assistance. I won't leave until I have it!"

"LEAVE!"

The voiceless shout practically lifted her up and threw her back. She screamed hysterically, scrambled round in a panic and raced over the lip of the bluff, moving faster than she ever had in her life.

"I've never been so insulted!" The bitter admission made the confession all the more galling. "Surely he could have heard me out."

Her two mates looked at one another. Claw Selves coughed and shook his head. "Perhaps you caught him on a bad day?"

"Why didn't he say so, then?"

Claw Shreves considered it and rubbed at an ear. "I have never heard of a Great Elder turning anyone away before. Are you certain he meant what he said?"

She looked back at the memory of the experience and her fur sort of bunched up around her shoulders and there was a shake in her voice.

"I was picked up like a kit and sent skidding clear up to the ridge line. If I thought it nothing more than a story before, what this Elder showed he could do is incredible. Of our race, he is surely the most advanced. When I was a kit and saved myself from that fall, I had no idea what I was doing, but this cat knows what he can do—and does it!"

Suddenly aware of her surroundings, she retracted her claws, straightened up from her crouching position, and got a hold of herself. It hadn't exactly been the pose of a sound thinking adult. She licked at a spot on her shoulder.

"Perhaps another day?" Claw Selves offered hopefully, stealing a look round at the rising sun.

"But I wanted some answers!"

Claw Shreves nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, and your purpose was correct, but we are speaking about an Ooroomoorian who is three times older than any in the clan. He must be at least a 120. Perhaps living to such an age increases one's peculiarities?"

She sniffed. "What do you propose?"

"To wait," he panted, smiling gently, tail curling round. "Wait, and see what happens."

"I may never have my answers then."

"Patience is the hunter's way," he quoted the younglings tutoring passage, "it gains for him who waits, the food for clan and self."

There was a long moment of thought, as she weighed the pros and cons, then easing onto her feet she strolled over to them, and fondled and licked their faces one at a time. She was fortunate to have such wonderful supporters.

Seven more days were to pass as their pride prepared for the great trek south. Claw Shreves went scouting ahead to the coastline to ensure the way was clear of danger. Claw Selves had gone to the western slope, to mediate a dispute between three smaller tribes.

As a rule clan heads should not have to interfere in the petty squabbles of small families bickering over tiny holdings, but sometimes it was necessary to do so, especially if it soothed quarrelsome natures during a Migration. Anything that would help with the transfer of territory was acceptable.

Aside of this, heralds had begun to show up from the South, representing their quarter of the Great Pride. The inspectors who followed nervously examined the grounds their parents had given up fifty years before, but as far as they could see nothing was amiss.

Spoor tracks showed large herds of animals in the area. Waterholes were still plentiful, and living areas seemed comfortable and clean. There were coughs of approval and many sighed with relief. But those who thought less of what they had to offer narrowed their eyes. What would they be getting in return?

Missing from these engagements was their matriarch, the famed She of the North. Some of the newcomers respectfully asked after her and were told she was meditating. It was widely thought that the constant use of her talent taxed her strength. In reality, she had used that gift successfully only once. The few times she tried afterwards proved she had no control over the thing at all.

The concern of the elders of north and south was set aside. If She was meditating now, at such a crucial time, then something extraordinary must be taking place. True, a Matriarch always oversaw territorial transfers, but this Matriarch was far, far different than any before her.

Her mates, along with those who assisted them, were then allowed to do their jobs without hindrance and preparations for the great trek continued. The anticipated meeting between Southern and Northern Matriarchs, as their branches swept by one another was shrugged off. If She of the North didn't fuss over it, why should She of the South?

As it was between North and South, so then was it between West and East. Four great clans separated for the good of the whole, each tracking their own paths, each working for the moment, when the legend would come.

Lands and bloodlines would cross, and a time would be embraced with the great sharing, when families adopted newcomers into their den, and yearning eyes might meet, and all was offered in trust and safekeeping.

Upon the nineteenth day, after having meditated long and hard and coming to naught for all her effort, she struggled up to the foot of her cave, looked wearily round and sighed. So, what was this never-ending restlessness about? Couldn't she be satisfied with the achievements she'd already managed? The pride was in better shape now through some of the changes she'd been able to instill than it had been in a hundred years.

Their resources and food herds were being hunted with more wisdom instead of the stupid slaughters of bygone times. Others were beginning to listen to her when she spoke of living in harmony with the nature around them, instead of simply using up what resources were available as fast as they were replenished—and that alone, she recalled, had taken a lot of near-begging.

If that wasn't enough, was she to spend the rest of her life pining after something that couldn't be obtained?

Suddenly she sensed someone behind her. Whirling round, claws out, belly to the ground, she was about to lunge or jerk away—and froze. Before her was an Ooroomorian who was unlike any she had seen before.

White coat, silver mane, august, he stood, or rather floated above her, looking down with eyes that glowed. He was more spirit than flesh.

"Greatest Elder," she coughed, groveling.

"Why have you not gone?" he asked, mind-voice powerful, resonating.

"Gone?" she asked, shaking her head. "Gone where?"

"You sought me out because you were troubled, were you not?"

She blinked, realizing then who this had to be. "Yes," she admitted, "I did."

His eyes looked down on her. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

For a long moment he looked down on her, and then shook his head sorrowfully. "I have waited three lifetimes to gain such insight and then to have it wasted on a kit!" He turned to leave, as if he'd said all there was to say.

"Wait!"

The Elder did not pause, and walking upon the air as if it were ground invisible to the eye, he continued on and soon was out of sight.

"You never answered my questions!" she shouted after him. "What insight are you talking about? What did you mean three lifetimes? What did you want to say to me?"

As a wind howling from the depths of a storm, the response came back, rolling in a sort of deep thunder: "YOU MUST LEAVE US!"

With a lunge she came out of her sleep, fur shocked upright, eyes wild and wheezing like a Galomb thrashing about in a full panic. Then she became calm and realized it was nothing more than a dream. No, not a dream—a vision.

What did the Elder mean? If she left, where would she go? Troubled, she slipped out of the chamber and turned for the entrance. Just before stepping out she paused to stare into the night. She'd never been afraid of the dark until now. A shiver worked its way down her spine. There was nothing for it; she had to face her fears, no matter where they took her.

Head up she stepped out and stood in the light cast off by the doubled moons, sucking in the crisp clean air. Then a strange idea came to her. Could one become like a dream or a thought on the wind?

Her eyes closed, as if sniffing at the thought, studying it, weighing it by unsheathed claws. If one became a part of the wind . . . her tail whipped back and forth in excitement. If the wind does not think—she cast aside the effects of the meditation—could we not impose our own will and make it think? If the wind had thought, could it not take us where we wished to go?

Her head straightened sharply, eyes opening wide. She knew her own limitations; knew herself to be nothing more than a speck in the stream of time, but with every living fiber of her being, she also knew—if they were to survive as a pride they had to change. It was that or extinction.

She snarled, taking up the challenge. Now she knew what the mystic meant. Her tail snapped back, her shoulders rose and her claws gripped bedrock beneath. The way was before her. With a slow growing, nerve generating growl of will, and calling upon every ounce of power in her—she let loose with an earth-shaking roar.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes after that when her mates and kin came scrambling over the bluff in a panicked rush to the very spot. There they stood in wonder, staring down from the edge of the still smoking remains of the huge crater, and then fearfully, they looked round, and then up . . . but She of the North was nowhere to be found.

What happens when Destiny acknowledges something unforeseen? Might some benevolent sleeper awake, and wonder, what is the cause of such a commotion?

An eye of extraordinary brilliance opened; the other remained closed, refusing to submit to a hasty whim. There was a whistling sound with breathy overtones mixed in the frigid air of that place, deep in

the heart of the world. Crystal overhangs of ice tinkled from the upper stone galleries, resonating with the perfection of those who slept below . . . and nothing more.

Wait, that wasn't right. It was not a 'nothing' that awoke her, and the eye narrowed—and the whistling suddenly shrieked.

"Hmm?" came her mate's query. "What's this?"

"Something has disturbed me."

A snort shifts the bedrock. "Oh, well then, thank you for ensuring I share in it and am disturbed also."

The sarcasm was ignored.

"See to it!"

The other groaned. Now two other eyes opened and brilliance poured forth. They glared this way, that way, until finally they changed character and dimension. Beamed up and around and froze. They'd found what the matter was and another snort erupted.

"This is nothing," he reported disdainfully.

"See to it!"

Resigned to the matter, his eyes closed, and the lights of cosmic fire dampened. "Very well." His mate's eye snapped shut and the last thought her lord and servant sent, was to one of their offspring. For such a little thing one of them could deal with it. The order was cast, thus *! Now whoever picked it up first . . .

"Stop that!" the voice commanded. Instantly the feline's wails ceased, shocked at the sudden intrusion into her misery. She sniffled.

"Silly thing," followed the comment. "Shifting yourself about like this, without safeguards, is sheer folly."

"Grrowll?"

"No questions. Just allow your mind to relax, relax, and I will physically draw you to me, back through that place you overstepped, back . . . back . . . drift with me . . . drift . . . drift . . . to me!"

Across the black enshrouded veil,

through the wall of the tunnel of light,

twixt stars

that sang

in the realm

of night . . .

Feline eyes peered through the raging storm, then scaled upwards, and froze. Upon the edge of a great cliff, staring down at her, was a creature as big as a mountain. Gripping the escarpment of cold granite with claws stronger than stone, there stood unmoved by the elemental violence about them, a horned, winged reptile that threatened to freeze the blood in her veins

Still she was not blasted at the sight of it. She was not destroyed. Taking hold of whatever sense she had left, she realized this was the being that drew her from that awful place.

“Grrrowwll, grrrowwll . . .?”

“Yes, little one,” the great one above her murmured gently, “you are safe now, with me.” Then he chuckled, and the chuckles rose until they became a warm laughter. The storm about them hushed for Storoth the Dr’gon was pleased with his catch.

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Author Bio:

Geoff Geauterre is a retired civil servant with a degree in History and special interests in Journalism and Research. He has lived in Florida, New York, Chicago, Boston, Maine, Montreal, Northern Quebec, Calgary, Northwest Territories, and parts of Alaska. He’s said he gained his sense of humor from the back of a mule.

Experienced in Medicine, Administration, Security, Publications and News Services as a reporter and commentator, with over four years in the U.S. Navy, he later applied that background when attending the University.

Geoff has traveled to England, France, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and the Mediterranean Islands. He likes studying Philosophy, Comparative Myths, Legends and Religions. He is also reasonably certain of having gained prior experience in writing in another life. He only hoped it wasn’t one that led him to the guillotine!

Behold the Eyes of Light is the first book in the Eyes of Light series that also includes **Far Come the Eyes of Light**, **Within the Eyes of Light** and **Beyond the Eyes of Light**.

Darkly, Darkly

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“Kiowa Nights.” I grew up in Colorado. The legends of the Old West are strong in this western state, and were especially so in the 1950’s. Colorado has had a unique relationship with its Native Americans. While there were depredations by Anglo-Americans against Native Americans (the Sand Creek Masacre comes to mind) the exchanges were often of a more respectful nature.

Still, there was a clash of cultures. This story is born of the spiritual differences between the Anglo-American and the Kiowa religions.

“Gates of Ashtoroth.” Soon after the Gulf War, I began to write a short story about the most ancient of archaeological sites, the ruins of Babylon. My experience of work and study in the area of archaeology demanded that I write about it, and my love of the mysteries of the cosmos suggested I work the spirituality of that ancient place together with the most ancient mystery of all: the Cosmic Reality.

You won’t find the answers to either of those mysteries in this story; merely a vigorous shove toward your own solution.

“A Day’s Work.” How many times have you dreamt of some very important place for you in the future? I wrote this story from a feeling of guilt at my own idle musings—when I should have been hard at work writing.

“Dracu’s Lament.” It seems that we are a culture bent on inclusion of lifestyles, rather than a shunning of life ways we don’t understand. I explore the fringes of political correctness with this story of a clash between life style and techno-culture.

“Winter of 100 Years.” The United States has no solitary claim for cultural and religious imposition on a native population. In this story, I explore the end of the Druids and a resulting consequence for the Christian victors. The story is fiction, however, the horrors of the “Dark Ages” are historical fact. Who knows; perhaps the gods Druids were so offended...?

“Welcoming Committee.” This is one of those “the universe is not only stranger than we know,” stories. While it is possible to conceive of the idea that a being is so alien, we can’t begin to understand it, here is an alien being we might understand, but too late.

My one thought about beings so alien we can’t understand them: what could we write about them that would constitute a story? That’s a rhetorical question. If you have the answer, please don’t tell me what it is.

“Estre’s Night.” Sometimes, evil is in our perceptions, not in the actuality. If there is a world of spirits, and if they could talk to us, then how would we perceive them?

“Last Word.” With the recent preoccupation of the news media regarding serial killers, I decided to try

to climb into the mind of one. Surprisingly easy, was my conclusion.

“Reality Test.” As our culture of technological dependence unfolds, we are presented with individual consequences once reserved to the ill-advised actions of governments. Add to this, the idea that amateurs are often the first to exploit a new possibility, such as building a two-way radio, or an aeroplane, or a computer or...

“Beta One.” In this story, I suppose the first use for a personal avatar in a virtual world will be for the experience and entertainment of those daring enough to “push the envelope.” What if the line between avatar and physical is slightly blurred by the technology?

“Alyse-X in Wonderhood.” I cannot be satisfied, it seems, staying inside the lines. My wife is of the opinion that I will get myself into more trouble than I can handle with some of my stories. She hates this one, but I find Alyse-X in a situation that requires my attention.

“Refuge.” This is my “give it back to the Indians” story. Perhaps we should. After all, they new much more about “it” than did the Anglo settlers. The Indians did, from time to time, have their own problems with the environment. Sometimes, a writer can have it both ways.

“Terwiliker, Time Trader.” The Time Paradox often draws a writer to the time-traveler story: what if you went back into time and killed your grandfather? The question is a lot simpler to ask, than it is to answer. I have fun with the time paradox in this story. Don’t look for a serious answer here. Bring popcorn, wear funny cloths and think “iconoclast.”

“Old Salt.” This story was conceived during a substantial wait for service at a fast food restaurant. I try to be productive with my down-time. By the way, this is a story of which my wife heartily approves. I call this my “here, be dragonnes” story.

“Freighter’s Gravy.” When you drive a tractor-trailer truck for hours at a time, you tend to forget that you ride a behemoth that can turn on you in an instant. Take my word for it. Another thing you can take my word for, is that you have a lot of time to think. This story is the result of such a rumination. Although the idea occurred to me twenty years ago, I didn’t write the story down. Writing behind the steering wheel is an invitation to the behemoth. This one, you really should take my word on.

“Cold Justice.” One of the great things about writing, is the ability to place yourself anywhere in time and find out what you think is important about then and there. This story evolved (literally unfolded) out my own intellectual struggle between the ideals of law and justice. I throw in religion for no additional charge.

Excerpt from **Darkly, Darkly**
collection of SF/F stories

By Robert Marcom

“Dracu’s Lament”

The call of the robot door startled him. He couldn’t seem to get used to the disembodied voice, nor to the sudden apparition of a holographic image of his visitor. He wished he could turn it off.

Ordinarily he would have, but not today. Today, his monthly supply was delivered. Other deliveries might be left for him in the delivery bin—but not this one.

“Delivery is by hand, Vladimir. You are required to receive it in person.”

“I know. Announce that I’m coming, please.” He didn’t know why he tried to hide his irritation with the door answering device. The device wasn’t neurologically intelligent enough to take offense. The biological enhancements were restricted by law from possessing anything close to human intelligence. This one was, in Vlad’s opinion, dumber than dirt.

Vlad made his way to the front entry, turning the lights up to dusky glow. He disliked doing so, but he thought the delivery-waif might not have low-light vision.

“Yes?”

“Vladimir Drakeson? I have a delivery for you. Do you have your certificate?”

Vladimir fumbled with the plastic card, turning it so that the little connection strip was available to the delivery... person? Vlad stopped in mid-gesture.

“Are you bio-engineered?” The comment passed from Vlad’s lips before he could stop it. The question was impolite, and worse. Vlad was always concerned that such a personal question would invite unwelcome curiosity in return.

“Yes. This is my first day. Virtual Intelligence Certified, number Ten, six sixty-six. You are a hematosexual, aren’t you?”

Oh mother, thought Vlad, here we go. “Yes. Yes I am. Is that my package?”

“Yes it is. Insert your certificate here, please.”

“I didn’t know they were approving virtual intelligence. I thought it was prohibited.”

“Not anymore sir. We were authorized by World Congress joint bill A-six sixty six. I’m the tenth VIC grown.”

“I just can’t seem to keep up anymore.”

The VIC-ten smiled. “Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I would like to know more about hematosexuals. You see, delivery will be my occupation. I am expected to learn on the job. You seem very open. Do you mind?”

“Hummf. I suppose not. What do you want to know?”

“Well, I know that ‘hemos’ were declared a legitimate alternative life-style by the Civil Rights Extension Act of 2056. I understand that your lifestyle is a protected one. I just don’t know what ‘hemos’ do differently than other people. Could you explain it to me? If you have time, that is.

"Well, first of all; I'd rather be called a vampire, than a hematosexual. Do you mind?"

"Oh no, sir. This is the sort of information I need."

"Good. We aren't really all that different. We do use bio-farmed blood. That is a bit personal though." Vlad looked more closely at the VIC-10. It looked rather generic; asexual, really. Rosy skinned and full of life, he thought. Full of life.

"Would you like to come in? I'd rather not explain it out here in the vestibule."

"I suppose so—but I can't stay long. I have other deliveries."

"Just drop the blood on that table. Say, tell me, are VICs biologically similar to human beings? You look amazingly like a little boy. Do you know your blood type?"

* * *

Dracu, the Old Dragon, stirred. The great serpent who slithered between the Realms of Light and Dark had awakened. It had indigestion. The pitifully meager soul it just received was decidedly substandard.

No substance really, Dracu thought. Everything seemed so bland these days. Dracu yearned for the old days. My son Dracula, he ruminated. Now, there was a vampire. What feasts we had! He knew how to harvest souls....

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Author bio

Robert Marcom is the Chairman of the Electronic Authors & Artists Guild and the founder of and moderator for Net Author, an online writers community. He resides in Houston Texas where he is gainfully unemployed as an author, illustrator and photographer. His non-fiction works **A Voyage Through The Cosmos** and **Earth Rocks!** are available from Stargate CD Books.

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Excerpt from **Dream Sequence**

and other tales from beyond

collection of SF/F stories

By Steve Lazarowitz

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Introduction

It seems many ages have passed since the original publication of this volume and much has happened during that period. I have moved through time, space and knowledge in the same way a cloud moves through the sky. I feel as if I've been propelled by the forces of nature, completely out of control of my destiny, unlike many of the characters in the stories you are about to read.

It is a challenge to analyze a volume of your own work as an outsider might, looking for a common thread explaining how each idea has managed to find its way into your consciousness. It's even harder when the body of work encompasses multiple genres, time periods and styles of writing. I suppose, if nothing else, the restless nature of my soul might be evident from the range of tales contained in this volume.

Yet, there are two themes that do tend to occur throughout my fiction. Much of my work centers

on duality; more than one reality in a single tale. At times, it takes the form of perception (as in Dream Sequence), while at others, the world is physically divided (as in Worlds Apart).

The second theme that runs through my writing involves my protagonists, who tend to have their adventures forced upon them by circumstance. Seldom do my characters set out to accomplish something. In most cases, the world requires from them a specific reaction, which they must perform in order to be true to themselves.

In this, many of my characters are like me, for surely in my life, I have been motivated by circumstance rather than my own needs. I see nothing particularly noble in this, but rather only seek to understand myself through analysis of the tales that spring forth from my rather non-pedestrian imagination.

So why am I bothering you with this? Because when I read a book, upon occasion, I'd like to know just how an author views his words, apart from the sort of questions you might find in interviews.

Here is what I think of my work... I like it or I wouldn't have written it. That said, I like some stories more than others, though each story is an attempt for me to say something about my life, my condition, my philosophy or, in some cases, my past.

The stories in this book are, as indicated in the title, much like a sequence of dreams. They've all sprouted from a single, unconventional mind. Yet like a dream, no matter how they might diverge, on some level, each story must contain just a little bit of me. And if you like a particular story, perhaps it will call to a little bit of you. Is it not conceivable you will recognize a piece of yourself in the characters and events that have emerged from my own skewed vision?

It is entirely possible, for I recognize bits of me in the works of other writers. I'm not sure what conclusions might be drawn from such an observation, except perhaps in many ways we are more alike than we care to consider. And yet, no matter how many authors write the same story, each is as different as night and day, a duality that permeates the very world in which we dwell.

It is my greatest hope that within the pages to come, you will recognize something you share with me; that you might, from my words, understand your own circumstance better; that you might see these stories as more than just a bit of random entertainment; that the images they place in your mind might dwell for a time with others that have already spent some time there.

At the very least, I hope these tales offer you some small amount of pleasure; that they may for a time, help brighten your existence as you travel your own roads to destinations I can not begin to imagine.

One final note, I highly recommend these stories be read in order. At least two are sequels and would make no sense without reading the first installment and one makes reference to an earlier tale.

I wish you well on your journey.

Steve Lazarowitz

Moonah, Tasmania
January 2003

“Dream Sequence”

When consciousness first found her, the moonlight seemed impossibly bright. Powerful gusts of wind continually shuffled all but invisible leaves. At the edge of vision, a wall of trees stretched leafy arms toward the heavens. Momentarily disoriented, she shifted her gaze, first to the dark clouds moving too rapidly through that luminous sky, then to those remarkably tall trees and finally to a small gray flash of movement off to her left.

Shaking sleep from her eyes, she propped herself into a sitting position in order to get a better look at it. At first she could not find the cause of the disturbance. Then it moved again and she saw it. It seemed so ordinary next to the rest of the tableau, that she laughed. Startled, the creature sat up on its hind legs and froze in the manner of rabbits throughout history.

“Well, hello there,” she said. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

The rabbit, perhaps sensing her gentleness, began to shift about, though it still kept a wary eye on the stranger. A night bird, hidden within that impossible forest, added its unearthly call to the scene.

“It can’t answer you,” rasped a voice from the shadows.

At once the woman snatched up her blanket and held it before her, as if somehow it might have power to protect against a stranger in the night. The approaching rustle of footfalls through leaves chilled her. She held her breath, until the intruder was close enough to behold.

It was tall, perhaps nine feet, with brownish skin not unlike the bark of a sycamore. Its legs resembled the boles of saplings, its arms, slender branches. Its eyes, only now illuminated, were brown and so very old. Its lips, a shade paler, were thin and cracked. The creature shook itself and she realized it wasn’t only its approach that created the dry crackling that preceded it. She rose slowly and waited, not yet certain whether or not she was in danger.

“Animals can no longer speak, since the Grand Dawteer has taken the magic.” There was such a note of sadness in that all too ancient voice, that she took a step forward and reached out a tentative hand.

“Who is the Grand Dawteer?”

“A Shadowlord. A creature made of dreams and darkness.”

Somehow, she could almost recall such a being. She wrapped herself in the blanket, the sudden chill caused by more than the wind.

“I am the Elvar, guardian of the forests.” He bowed low, displaying more flexibility than his hardened exterior would suggest he possessed.

The woman bowed back. “My name is Marlayna.”

“I know who you are. I know why you have come. You will follow. There is time to eat and sleep. The trip, no doubt, has been taxing.”

“How did I get here?”

“We will speak later when you are rested.”

“Where is this place?”

“Do you not remember?”

The area was familiar, as if long ago she had stood in this very spot, yet she could recall no such circumstance. When she didn’t reply, Elvar turned and moved toward the forest. Marlayna followed. The trees seemed to mutter and sigh as she walked amongst them and, though she could not understand their meaning, she had no doubt they were communicating with each other. For a time she listened, as

if she might suddenly remember the language they spoke. Like everything else, there was something almost familiar about it.

* * *

The cave mouth appeared before them so suddenly, it seemed as if it had been evoked by magic. Elvar gestured for her to enter. Once inside, Marlayna gasped. She had been here before.

The inside of the cave looked rather like a living room, complete with a large leather sofa, two chairs seemingly made of feathers and a table that was nothing more than a giant inverted tortoise shell. Intricate carvings decorated much of the rough hewn stone walls. She walked to the couch, sat and ran a hand gently over the table. For a few moments, she could almost recall. Only then did she realize Elvar had followed her inside and was watching.

“Alyar died when the magic was stolen. Do you remember now?”

Alyar was the creature that had once inhabited the shell. She could picture him clearly. He was gentle, friendly, soft spoken, engaging... her mind recoiled when she realized she was thinking about a reptile. Elvar saw her confusion and looked sad.

“Where am I? What’s happening to me?”

“You are in the Lands Beyond. You have been here before, though not for many seasons. We have all missed you. Why did you abandon us?”

“I didn’t abandon you. I wanted to come back, but couldn’t find the way.” The memories were so close, their proximity was almost a physical pain. For a few seconds, she battled amnesia, then began to cry.

Elvar watched for a time, until he could stand her sorrow no longer. Then he began to sing. The song was deep, melodic and timeless. It was a tune most humans would never hear, though it was available to all who sought it. It embraced her, caressed her, eased her breathing. She had almost never heard a sound like it. Her sobs diminished until they disappeared altogether. Marlayna drifted, until she fell into slumber.

* * *

It was a sound that should have never been there. She struggled to remain asleep, but as it persisted, she found herself drawn toward consciousness. She sat up suddenly, momentarily disoriented. She turned to stare at the source of the disturbance. It took her a few moments to recognize the object. When she did, she moved automatically to silence it. She stared at the device for a bit longer before its name resolved in her mind. It was an alarm clock.

El Tigre, the orange tabby she’d adopted for company, sat on the edge of the bed, gently licking the white tips of his paws. Marlayna absently scratched his head as she looked around her studio apartment, located just off the New York University campus in Manhattan. The room had not changed. Her clothes were still strewn unceremoniously about, a constant condition until her mother came to visit. The television was too small and too old, but most of the time she was too busy to care. The books that lined the single shelf by the front door were her most treasured possessions, but now, they did not comfort her. For something was once more missing from her life.

She thought back to the odd dream. She really could almost remember being there. She looked at the alarm again and panicked when she realized the time. Marlayna jumped from bed, startling El Tigre into flight. She grabbed a pair of jeans she hoped she hadn’t already worn, pulled on a sweater she could wear without a bra and slipped into sandals. By the time the door slammed behind her, the Lands Beyond had given way to a far more tangible reality.

* * *

Washington Square Park, located in the middle of Greenwich Village, is where Marlayna often found herself when classes were over. She bypassed the dope peddlers, the students on roller blades,

the Manhattanites walking dogs and the ever-present chess players who fought their wars in the park's southwest corner. Instead, her eyes sought the trees. She sat for a time, watching the occasional squirrel climb upwards, and wondered, not for the first time, whether it was aware the ability was in any way remarkable. Marlayna loved the trees, but knew they could never compare to the majestic towers that inhabited the Lands Beyond. The thought startled her and she remembered.

She'd dreamt of a place she had once dreamt about and in that dream remembered. She was glad she was no longer in therapy. She didn't relish having to explain that to her analyst. In fact, she didn't relish the idea of therapy at all. She had tried it on and off for a few years, but it always made her feel as if something was wrong with her. After all, she wasn't insane. And it had never helped to fill the ever-present void in her soul. Nor had anything else.

Marlayna was a business major. She attended school, worked to pay for what student aid didn't cover and when she was done, she studied. No wonder she was having odd dreams. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a date or even out with friends. When there was time, there was no money. When there was money, there was no time. Marlayna Kipperling was too busy to enjoy living.

Even now, she'd spent too much time sitting in the park. When she realized, she rose and jogged the rest of the way home, just in time to shower and change for work. As she dressed, she briefly considered quitting school, waitressing, or both, but knew she never would. Her mother would never be able to handle it.

She thought about her mother then, the one stabilizing point in a world of constant motion. It had been that way since her father died. Marlayna had been nine. She remembered her father more as a concept than an image. It had been the two of them after that and would always be that way. Because of her mother, Marlayna would stay in school and continue to carry food to the hungry denizens of the East Village, no matter the toll on herself.

Work that day was a blur of people, food and snatches of conversation that never quite made sense. Since it was the Village, most of it wouldn't, even if she did stop to listen to an entire exchange.

By the time she reached home that night, she was exhausted. El Tigre, waiting patiently by his food dish, regarded her with large sad eyes. Marlayna had forgotten to check his bowl when she'd stopped home to shower.

"I'm sorry, little one." She reached into the cabinet and pulled two cans of cat food. El Tigre watched with undisguised interest. She held both cans out, as she did each night, and waited for her pet to choose his meal. As usual, he rubbed his face against one can immediately. She knew from experience, no matter how many times she switched hands, he would continue to pick the same can, as if he could read the label. He couldn't, of course, but it entertained her to believe otherwise.

"Is it chicken and gravy tonight? Yes, I think that's what you want." She rose, opened the can and dumped its contents into the bowl. As soon as she placed it on the floor, El Tigre attacked it greedily. She watched, smiling. Without him, she would be lonely indeed.

When she turned toward her bed, she noticed the light on the answering machine blinking. She stared at it. She really didn't want to know who it was, unless of course it was Gregory, the cute guy from her accounting class she'd given her number to days ago. She walked to the machine, prayed silently and pressed the button. When her mother's voice began, she sighed.

"Hi honey, it's only me. Just wanted to check in on you. Call me when you get a chance. Bye now."

It wasn't Gregory after all. She didn't realize how much she had hoped for that call, until she didn't get it. She sat on the bed and stared at the phone. She fought back tears, though she was aware it was

somewhat more than a phone call that was missing from her life. She waited until she was calm again before she picked up the receiver and dialed.

"Hello."

"Hi, Mom. Did I wake you?"

"No. I was watching a movie."

"Anything good?"

"I don't know. I came in the middle. It's some suspense thing. I'm glad you called. I shouldn't be watching it at this hour."

Marlayna tried to think of something to say that wouldn't give away her depression, which pretty much eliminated school and work. It took her a few moments to think of something harmless. "I had the oddest dream last night. I dreamt I was in a place called the Lands Beyond. There was this tree man and this crazy forest. It was so real."

There was a long silence on the other end.

"Mom?"

"I'm here."

"What's the matter?"

"You used to have dreams like that, just after your father died."

"Dreams like what?"

She could hear the pain in her mother's voice. "You called it the Lands Beyond back then too. You said it was a beautiful, magical place, full of talking animals and love and laughter. All the things that had gone out of your life after daddy died."

"When did they stop?"

"When you were ten. I had put you into therapy and based on the doctor's recommendation, you were placed on medication."

Marlayna couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What kind of medication?"

"It's called Desipramine. It was used to treat Attention Deficit Disorder in children."

Marlayna gripped the phone tighter, but said nothing. After a few seconds her mother continued.

"Try to understand. You weren't paying attention in school. You were lost in a dream world most of the time. I was worried about you. I didn't know what else to do. And I was so afraid to be alone." Marlayna could hear anguish in the voice she loved most and couldn't bring herself to be angry.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm just surprised, that's all. How come you never told me?"

"I wasn't certain I did the right thing. I'm still not sure. I didn't want you to hate me."

"I could never hate you." That much was true, whatever had happened. "I'm sure you made the best choice at the time. How long was I on it?"

"About a year. You started getting dizzy spells, when you first began to menstruate. The doctor recommended I take you off. You went through pretty bad withdrawal. It hurt me so, to watch you suffer." Her mother's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Oh, Mom. It's okay. Really. I know you had only the best intentions."

It took Marlayna another half an hour to calm her mother before she was finally able to hang up. By that time, she was exhausted. She barely stopped to remove her clothes before falling into bed, but she did not find sleep immediately. Instead she spent a long time trying to remember the lost year of her life.

When she woke, she stretched painfully. She was surprised to find herself on a couch. Elvar was waiting. "Did you sleep well?"

Startled, she twisted into a sitting position, ignoring her muscle's protests. "What?"

"You were very tired. Do you feel better now?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. This is all so strange."

"You didn't used to think so."

"I don't know what to think. Why am I here?"

"To bring magic back to the Lands Beyond."

Marlayna stared at the tree man for a long time. "And how am I supposed to do that?"

"If I knew, I'd have done it myself."

Marlayna stood, slowly making her way around the room. "This isn't real. It's a dream."

"How do you know? Perhaps this is reality and your waking world is the dream."

"I can't afford to think that way."

"We can't afford for you to believe otherwise. Don't you see? You are our only hope. If you desert us, if magic is not restored, we will fade from existence. That is why you've returned."

Marlayna walked to the cave's entrance and looked out. By the light of day, the forest was both peaceful and beautiful. If it wasn't real, it should have been. "What must I do?"

"You must cross the River of Time. No one has been able to, since the Grand Dawteer has stolen the magic."

"How am I to then?"

"You'll find a way."

Or the Lands Beyond would fade from existence. Vaguely she remembered crossing that fabled river before. She had been on a raft. At the fore, a slender, well muscled man guided the craft. She could see him clearly, the sun reflecting off his intelligent blue eyes. Marlayna drew a breath.

"Is Keryl still around?"

Elvar nodded. "The ferryman still lives, but refuses to make the trip."

"He'll make it for me."

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Author Bio

Steve Lazarowitz is a writer with a singular goal. He tries to make people think. His short fiction has been compared to *The Twilight Zone*, which very much appeals to him. "We live in a world of wonders, some of which are shrouded in shadow. My job is to remind people of that."

His award winning short stories and innovative articles and essays have appeared in *Jackhammer*, *Exodus*, *Planet Relish*, *The Wandering Troll*, *The Hood*, *Conflicting Spectrums*, *Dream Forge*, *Aphelion*, *Titan*, *Twilight Times* and many other ezines.

More information on his writing can be found at his web site:

<http://www.dream-sequence.net/>

Excerpt from **Eyes of Truth**
fantasy detective story

By Linda Suzane

Eyes of Truth

The gods looked upon the world they had reformed and on the creatures they had placed within it and were concerned their work would be destroyed by the barbaric, unknowing ways of their creations. So they sent the God Insu.

Insu brought order with his wisdom and his laws, uniting many of the battling tribes into the Kingdom of Naj.

Insu was not like others, for he could tell when a man spoke the truth. His sons and their sons, the Insu-has, had the gift and wore the Eyes of Insu tattooed across their foreheads.

When Insu's time was fulfilled, his sons came together in a great Trial of Truth to choose the one who had the clearest Eyes to rule Naj as the Dyamu, for the Eyes were stronger in some than in others. And so down through the centuries, the Insu-has ruled the people of Naj.

But despite their great talent, they were simply men, some good men, some not.

"Horez take you," Insu-ha Zomo cursed loudly. "I know you're cheating." Zomo threw down his cards. They slid across the polished table to rest against Waulo's folded hands.

This late at night, the Nu parlor was quiet with only a scattering of occupied tables. Zomo's accusation stopped all play; curious faces turned. Dar tensed, glancing from Zomo to Waulo, ready to interfere.

"I don't cheat," Waulo said, her gravelly voice low with a threat to which Zomo was oblivious.

Anticipation charged the air, waiting, hoping for a fight. Dar leaned closer to the table.

Waulo looked down at her winning hand, the cards laying face up in the middle of the table. Her cold dark eyes blinked once, then twice. The decision made, she smiled, which did nothing to gentle her broad, homely face. "Great sir, I'm as surprised as you that I won. When I bet, I was almost certain I would lose, for you are a strong player. The God Tazar must have walked across my path tonight."

Dar relaxed a bit. Waulo took accusations of cheating seriously. Men had died for making them.

She had spoken the truth. She never cheated at Nu. She didn't have to; she was that good.

Waulo continued, "I'm sure that next time you will win."

"It's getting late," Dar said, throwing down his own cards on the table. "Why don't we quit?"

Zomo looked at Dar. "I still think she was cheating. What do you think?"

"She wasn't cheating," Dar said calmly, hating to get dragged into it. He had warned Waulo against playing with the Insu-has. They were too used to winning. "The Eyes of Insu tell me she is speaking the truth. Don't the Eyes tell you?"

Zomo glared at Dar. The colorful tattoo that proclaimed Dar an Insu-ha ran across the width of Dar's forehead and possessed five eyes among the swirls and curlicues. Zomo's didn't reach across his forehead and only had three eyes. He didn't like Dar's insinuation that he might lack the Eyes to

perceive the truth of Waulo's words. He turned to the other player of the foursome, Insu-ha Emmir.

"What do you think?"

"Tazar didn't just walk across her path, he stomped on it. I've never seen such luck."

Zomo grinned, sure that Emmir was agreeing with him.

"Surely as Insu-ha Emmir says, it was only luck," said Waulo. "For I have rarely played against such challenging players. You're both very skilled."

Zomo looked for a moment as though he was going to challenge her statement, then he subsided back on his cushion, believing her. Dar smiled.

Waulo didn't cheat, but she certainly could lie. Not that the Eyes of Insu told him she was lying. No, he couldn't tell. But then neither could the others.

"Come on, old woman," Dar said, "let's go."

"No," Zomo said. "Another round. My luck is bound to change."

Waulo hesitated for a moment, obviously weighing her purse against future winnings.

"Waulo," Dar warned.

"The Insu-ha is right, it's late, and I am an old woman. I need my rest. I'm not young like you."

Waulo was approaching fifty, her black hair liberally streaked with grey, but her squat body was muscular and strong, well honed, compared to the pampered softness of Zomo and Emmir. Dar was twenty-four, Zomo and Emmir maybe five or six years older. But Dar would match Waulo against either one of them for stamina and strength.

And she was more than a match for them in deadliness for, though long retired, as a young woman Waulo had followed her father's trade as an assassin. She still possessed the instinct and the skills.

"Dar," Emmir called after them as they were leaving, "what we talked about before. My winter wife really wants you to paint her portrait."

"I'll think about it. Now that I'm the head of the family, I don't have as much time to pursue my other interests."

"I would consider it a great favor."

Dar and Waulo emerged from the ahabu into the predawn darkness of the quiet street.

"I appreciate that you didn't kill the fool," Dar said.

"I didn't think your brother would approve."

Dar laughed. The Dyamu Coiji, Dar's brother, most certainly would not approve.

They walked home together in companionable silence. Around them, Dar sensed the great city of Suterama begin to stir, as the servants rose to prepare for another busy day.

The gatekeeper, watching for his master, had the gate open when Dar and Waulo reached it. He bowed low as Dar entered.

The grand house had been his father's before he died two moons ago, naming Dar his heir and therefore head of the family. There had been many, including Dar, who were surprised. They had expected his father to choose his younger son, the Dyamu, rather than the disgraced elder son.

Dar wondered if his father had known that Dar had cheated during the Trials of Truth and let his brother win, let Coiji be named Dyamu in Dar's place.

Had his father understood the uncontrollable rage that had driven Dar to take retribution on Insu-ha Nito for beating and mutilating the beautiful So, Maku? To do precisely to Nito what he had done to the woman Dar loved. That might have been all of it, but Nito's wounds became infected and he died.

Had his father forgiven him the shame brought to the whole family by the resulting scandal? Was naming Dar heir his father's way of making amends? Or a way of forcing Dar to do what his father considered his duty as an Insu-ha? Dar had never asked, never talked to his father about it, and now that his father was dead, he never could. Still, he was curious. And at times, he heartedly resented the

burdens of responsibility that had been shoved upon him, especially Ravra.

He glanced toward her pavilion. It was his duty to honor and care for his father's winter wife, along with his father's other three wives, but Ravra had once been Dar's spring wife, until she betrayed him. In his anger and disappointment he had fled, afraid of himself and what he might do. Abandoned, Ravra had convinced his father that marrying her was the only way to preserve the honor of the family. Had his father understood what had made Dar forsake his position, his family, and flee Suterama?

A warbling cry from the throats of the watch dragons bugled through the stillness. Then the ground began to shake. Dar, thrown off balance, grabbed Waulo. As quickly as it came, the earth tremor was gone. Stillness returned. Dar stood poised, expectant, but after a moment, relaxed. Just another earthquake.

"Something bad is going to happen," Waulo proclaimed solemnly.

"That's just superstition," Dar said. "It was an earthquake. They happen all the time. It doesn't mean that something bad is about to occur."

"Little do you know, boy."

Dar sighed. He knew better than to try to argue Waulo out of her superstitions.

* * *

Po hurried across the courtyard as fast as his fat body would allow. The sun rested on the horizon, a round golden ball far too bright for him to look at. For the first time he could remember, he had overslept. Already the cookfire should have burnt down to glowing coals, the daeshi boiling in the big kettle. He knew he would be beaten if breakfast was late, yet he stopped to bow in front of the garden shrine, sending a prayer to the house elementals that the slumber that had held him in its spell would also hold the master. Perhaps the gods would smile upon Po. Had he not brought a garland of orange and yellow leaves from the nazo tree to decorate the shrine of Ata, mother of all gods? And just last moon he had given a large koy-sen cooked in sauce to the priests of Nosawee for their feast day, and he always remembered the house elementals with gifts of cakes.

He placed his palms together, fingertips touching his forehead, and bowed three times to the elementals, then hurried on. Perhaps the elementals had heard his prayer. Usually Oen, the gardener, rose with the light to work in the garden, but he was not to be seen. The garden lay quiet and still, only the trilling of birds greeted the sun.

Po rushed to the stone-built okomi, which stood behind the kitchen area, to grab a fresh bag of daeshi and a haunch of xylo that had been curing.

The only light was from the door and the small windows placed high up under the eaves, but he went unerringly into the dimness, not bothering to light the lamp. He grabbed the small bag of grain and turned toward the back corner for the haunch of meat, when the smell hit him. He knew it for what it was, after all he had slaughtered enough animals to recognize the smell of blood.

He saw the shape of an animal carcass hanging from one of the ceiling hooks, but in the darkness he couldn't tell what it was. He fumbled for the lantern, lighting the wick, before turning back to see.

It was as naked and bloody as an animal carcass, but it wasn't an animal. It had been human.

A rope tied about the waist looped over the ceiling hook; arms, head, and legs dangled down. Long slashes scored the calves and forearms, and the hands and feet were red with blood.

The body turned slowly as it dangled, and Po saw that it was Oen.

Beneath the body sat the large kettle that Po used for rendering. Po watched as a drop of blood slipped from a fingertip and fell. It seemed to take forever until it splashed into the pot. The sound rang so loud as to deafen Po. Then he heard his own voice screaming. He could not stop.

* * *

Raku picked up the ten-day report from the Master of the Guard in Dak-moon and read of the murder in distant Funara Province. When he finished, he picked up his stylus and carefully inscribed his mark and the date upon the page. His brow furrowed and he bit his lip in concentration as he worked to get the symbol just right.

Raku sat on pillows at a low desk in a room in Suterama's great Hall of Records. Floor-to-ceiling shelves held boxes, each marked with the name of a town or place in Funara Province. Raku knew everything that happened in Funara Province. It all came here to be read, marked, and filed. This document belonged in the Dak-moon box. He had lived near Dak-moon, and on market and feast days, his whole family traveled there. He didn't like Dak-moon now because its box was on the top shelf and beyond his eleven-year-old arm's reach. He would be forced to call one of the adult servants to reach it.

With his perfect recall, he reviewed in his memory the contents of the Dak-moon box. There wasn't much, for the previous clerk had retired only four moons before. All that remained in the box were deeds, records of honors and grants, and a few unresolved matters like the reports of a mysterious illness. To that, was now added a murder, a particularly gruesome murder. The young boy, which in truth he still was, thrilled to the detailed description of the death of Oen, the gardener. Shivers ran up and down his spine at the thought of a deranged killer stalking his prey, then bleeding it dry.

Then Raku realized something was missing from the box, something important. He was almost afraid to tell, for he should have noticed its absence sooner, but he was more afraid not to tell.

He hurried down the corridor to where the master clerk sat ensconced on pillows behind another low desk. Raku trembled as he bowed. "Great sir, I beg to report something of concern about Dak-moon."

The master clerk frowned. "Where is Dak-moon?"

Raku blushed, realizing that though they had met, the master clerk didn't realize that he was now the clerk for Funara Province. He mumbled the words.

"Speak up." The master clerk waved his stylus at him.

"Funara Province." The words echoed about the room, sounding way too loud to Raku's ears. He blushed in embarrassment.

"Tell me, child," the master clerk said, his tone softening. "What have you found?"

Raku looked down at his feet, afraid to look at the master clerk. "I have no excuse for my laxness."

"Don't worry. It takes time to learn to be a good clerk. Mistakes are made, but you have come to tell me, and that is how it should be. We can rectify whatever has happened."

Encouraged, Raku told him what he had just realized. "For the last four moons we haven't received a report from the Insu-ha Shoki, High Magistrate of Dak-moon. I didn't notice, not at first, because there weren't any, not since I became clerk." He knew he was babbling.

"There's no mention of any problem in the Guard Master's ten day reports?"

Raku shook his head.

"It's strange," the master clerk said, then he smiled. "But not all that uncommon. Insu-has are not known for being report writers."

Relief flooded through Raku.

"Still, it is important. Is there anything else?"

"Today, the Master of Dak-moon's Guard reported a body was discovered, murdered, hung above a pot, and drained of all blood."

"A sad business, but why have you brought this to my attention? Was there a request for assistance?"

"No, Great sir."

"Well, then, why?"

Raku was surprised that the master clerk didn't find the matter of a murder important. Of course, the master clerk must hear of murders all the time. Raku felt foolish and struggled to regain what he had lost.

"One moon ago, a local healer, Torren, begged assistance from the medical college to discover the cure for a mysterious illness that has killed many."

"You have communicated the request to the medical college?"

"Yes. Along with a note of censure from Physician Chismu, in which he claimed that Healer Torren exaggerated the problem and didn't follow the proper protocols."

The master clerk looked at him expectantly. Raku continued, "It's just that the man who died was a member of Physician Chismu's household. In his request, Healer Torren accused Physician Chismu." Raku closed his eyes and brought the document into his mind's eye, quoting exactly from it. "Physician Chismu's continued refusal to recognize the seriousness of the problem threatens all of Dak-moon and possibly all of Naj. All cures fail. People are dying."

"I see. You were right to report it."

Inwardly, Raku gave a sigh of relief. He had been right to report it.

The master clerk continued, "I doubt that the murder and what appears to be a rivalry between Physician Chismu and this healer are connected. Still, this Torren has made a serious charge. I believe the problems in Dak-moon should be reported to the Dyamu."

Raku swelled with pride as he bowed. An event in his province would have the attention of the Dyamu, ruler of all Naj.

* * *

Insu-ha Coiji, the High Judge and Arbitrator, the Dyamu of Naj, tried not to look bored as the master clerk droned on. He longed for the daily report to be over. He leaned back against the carving of the high-backed audience chair and tried, unobtrusively, to shift back and forth, hoping to scratch an annoying itch. His secretary, Hakoni, saw the slight movement and frowned, the corners of his mouth matching his long drooping mustache. Coiji found himself responding to that frown like a small boy caught daydreaming by a stern teacher. He straightened. Then he stopped himself. He was the Dyamu and had been for six years. He was no longer a frightened 14-year-old, unsure of himself. Still, he returned his attention to what the master clerk was saying.

"In Dak-moon of Funara Province, there are troubling circumstances. A murder, a gardener was killed and drained of all blood. The city is also plagued by a mysterious illness." At least it wasn't floods or food shortages. "And we haven't received a report from the High Magistrate in four moons."

Coiji was disappointed. He didn't care that a magistrate hadn't bothered to write a silly report. Hakoni continued to take notes. Coiji saw the tip of the man's tongue at the corner of his mouth, as though he was concentrating hard, but it was an old signal from the time he had first become Dyamu. It told him to pay attention to this matter.

"Who is the Magistrate?"

"The Insu-ha Shoki," the master clerk responded.

Now Coiji understood Hakoni's interest. "There's no indication of a problem?"

The master clerk shook his head.

"And what does the Guard report?"

“Nothing regarding the Insu-ha, Dyamu. If his greatness has no more questions that concludes my report.”

Coiji glanced at his secretary, wondering if there were more questions he should ask. Hakoni put his brush down and folded his hands across his stomach. Coiji took that as a signal and gave a wave of dismissal. The master clerk bowed his way out of the small audience chamber. Once the doors were closed, Coiji gave up all pretense and vigorously scratched his itching shoulder blade, ignoring the fact that his nails snagged the delicate embroidery of his ceremonial robe.

With a sigh of relief, he turned to his secretary. Hakoni had served his father and now Coiji. In the last six years, Hakoni had grown an elder’s beard. The wispy, grey-streaked chin whiskers were long enough to reach his folded hands, a respectable length. His drooping mustache, which Hakoni kept trimmed to half the length of his whiskers, was still coal black. Coiji wondered if Hakoni judiciously helped it to remain so dark. “So, old man, what are you thinking? Should we do something about this murder?”

“It’s more disturbing that Insu-ha Shoki hasn’t sent his reports. He may be planning something.”

“If Shoki was, as you say, planning something, he’d be sure to send his reports so we wouldn’t suspect. Is this one of your little feelings or do you have other information that makes Shoki suspect?”

“Nothing new, but as you say, perhaps a hunch. When the master clerk spoke of Dak-moon, I felt a sense, well, of heaviness, darkness. I can’t recall ever having such a feeling. It is most puzzling.”

Hakoni was famous for his hunches. His little feelings he called them. Coiji’s father had learned to listen to them, after encountering several disasters when he ignored Hakoni’s warnings. Coiji always listened.

“I will send a Hand,” said Coiji.

Hakoni grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and poised the stylus above the blankness.

“Send for my brother, Dar.”

“My Dyamu!” Surprise and doubt filled Hakoni’s voice. “Is he a wise choice?”

“A perfect choice.”

Hakoni frowned, Coiji grinned back playfully. He held up his hand, counting his reasons on his fingers.

“First, I can’t send anyone but another Insu-ha to investigate Shoki.” Another finger joined the first. “Name another Insu-ha who would be willing to travel so far without complaint on such minor matters as a few missing reports and the murder of an unimportant gardener.” He put up the third finger. “Dar will care passionately about justice for this gardener and will search for the truth, no matter where it leads.”

Hakoni’s dark eyes acknowledged the truth of Coiji’s statements.

“A wise choice, my Dyamu.”

“Stop lying to me. I can always tell.”

Hakoni sighed. “It’s just that sometimes your brother cares too much about the wrong things and too little for the consequences.”

Now Coiji frowned; anger tinged his voice. “Insu-ha Nito deserved what Dar did! Must that scandal haunt Dar for the rest of his life?”

“It’s not easy to forget that Insu-ha Nito died.”

“But Dar didn’t kill him,” Coiji objected. He rose and stalked the length of the room and back. “Not four moons ago, Dar and Waulo saved my life. If not for them, the assassin would have killed me. Surely, if people knew, it would change their opinion.”

“No,” Hakoni said firmly. “It’s better that the matter remains a secret. Your brother agrees.”

Coiji frowned. He had wanted to award his brother a medal so that the whole court would know

his brother's bravery, but both Hakoni and Dar had told him no. "If I can't reward him in public, at least I can make him my Hand."

"There are those who would use Dar's reputation against you. If he makes a mistake, it's you who will suffer."

"He won't make a mistake. I know my brother. He will find the murderer. If Shoki is up to something, as you suspect, you must agree that Dar and Waulo are the ones to uncover it."

"You can't be thinking of sending Waulo!" Hakoni protested in alarm.

"Waulo will make an excellent legal assistant. She's well versed in the law."

"Well versed in criminal pursuits."

"Her husband was an advocate, and so was she."

"I would hardly call her an advocate. She helped him on occasion. Surely, someone more experienced. Someone who has previously assisted a Hand. Someone who understands the difficulties of being a Hand and can advise your brother."

"Waulo is very qualified; besides, she has other skills." Hakoni paled. Coiji grinned impishly. "Not that she'll need them."

"I should hope not!"

"Moreover if I send Waulo with Dar, I may avert a financial crisis within my court. Far too many of my subjects have lost to her at Nu, including, I believe, you."

Hakoni looked guilty. His eyes no longer met Coiji's. "The god Tazar favors her too often. I'm sure she's cheating, but I can't figure out how."

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Author bio

Linda Suzane is pursuing her lifelong dream to be a full time writer. Her passions include vampires, murder, and mystery. Her first ebook is a romantic mystery about a murder mystery game designer whose mystery game goes murderously wrong. **The Murder Game** is available from www.playmurder.com. Linda enjoys designing her own mystery games and is currently working on three games, one based on the game in **The Murder Game**.

Sometimes she combines her interest in murder, mystery, and vampires as she did in her novel *Eyes of Truth*, a fantasy mystery which includes two different breeds of vampire the Wo-nur and the Dolzi, pitting mythical Wo-nur against the stark reality of the Dolzi, exploring how legends and superstition can terrify, but reality can destroy.

Linda considers herself something of an Internet explorer, seeking to know and conquer this new frontier as an eBook author, content provider, and web designer. She teaches a class at her local college, "Write and Publish Online." She lives with her husband of thirty-three years on the beautiful Oregon coast with four domineering cats and an office full of dragons.

More information on her writing can be found at her web site:

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Excerpt from **Monkey Trap**

sf suspense

By Lee Denning

Monkey Trap

Chapter One

Jungle of Purace District, Colombia | Sunday 0505 EDT

The Assassin sat in the crotch of a tree awaiting the time his target would appear. He contemplated the full moon, cradling into the mountains to the west. To the east, the sun would be easing toward the treetop horizon, a fat glowing orange in the humid air. The artist in him admired the ethereal light of the approaching tropical dawn. Viewed from space, he was under the terminator: half the planet in darkness, half in light.

Like me, the Assassin smiled crookedly. The smile faded as his hard hands unfolded the delicate gossamer-winged angel of death. The morning birdsong of the jungle grew muted around him.

Creating the little killer drone had been complex, yet it operated so simply. He marveled again at the miniaturization and technology, proud of his part in its creation. Then he ran down the preflight checklist on his laptop computer screen.

The drone's soft feminine voice whispered confirmation in his ear:

"Wings configured.

"Power up.

"Control surfaces functional.

"Telemetry up, both directions.

"Global positioning engaged.

"Target acquisition up.

"Laser guidance operative.

"Darts armed."

The tiny laptop showed an all-green board. He disconnected the umbilical cord connecting his laptop to the killer drone and stepped out of his tree hammock onto the branch. With the foliage pushed down by his weight, the drug lord's compound became clearly visible, pocketed into a hillside over two miles away on the north side of the valley. The straight lines of the crop fields on the valley floor, and the clear fields of fire they allowed, defined the compound for what it truly was: a well-defended enclave.

The Assassin studied it carefully through his binoculars in the growing light, his soldier's training appreciating their thoroughness. He spoke into his headset microphone, ticking off key points:

"The file on security is quite accurate.

"Electronic surveillance and random roving patrols extend almost this far out.

"Physical barriers, landmines, concertina fences closer in.

"Not just your usual small arms; confirm Vulcan cannon on the Hummers.

"Armored vehicles, probably custom-built hybrids, under the camouflage netting; I can't ID.

"They have an array of heavy-caliber machine guns and rocket-grenade launchers, also under the netting.

"Both fixed and mobile anti-aircraft platforms; I see four and two."

The Assassin thought back through the intelligence file he had memorized. Security run by ex-Israeli intelligence officers and former Legionnaires; criminals all, but nonetheless some of the most devious minds in their craft. Probably the latest and best technology drug money can buy, he admitted. They certainly had the best security operation in the entire drug trade, both people and equipment.

"Feeling pretty secure, are you?" he concluded the analysis. "Well, not this morning, and not from me." The threat slid out easily through his crooked smile.

The Assassin kissed the little killer drone, and pointed it toward the compound. Within seconds, it integrated its camera view with that of the high-altitude recon drone above them, solving out the global positioning equations, computing its flight path.

The drone whispered into his headset, "Object location acquired, release when ready."

"Fly true, angel," he blessed, and the drone slid from his hand. It lofted with delicate grace and eerie quiet eastward away from his treetop nest, taking a meandering course through the uppermost canopy of the jungle.

No one could pick up the little killer drone by instrument; even tuned radars would paint its composite materials as a small bird. No one would likely pick it up by eye; with its gossamer wings and pale colors it flew ghostlike through the skies, day or night. Even so, the Assassin guided it in from the east, keeping it in the dawn light at treetop level.

The intelligence profile said the target would appear on the balcony right at sunrise. He did—a huge, hulking, dark-skinned man, a barrel chest with a thick cover of black hair, on top of oddly short legs. The recon drone, hovering at 84,000 feet in the air ten miles east, picked him up immediately. Another marvel of technology, the recon drone was solar-powered; it could hold on-station in the stratosphere above the clouds for months or years. It had been watching the compound for the past two weeks, preparing for this moment. Now, the stereoscopic vision of its wingtip cameras transmitted an image of superb resolution to the Assassin's laptop. Diego Corrano, el Jefe, was unmistakable, right down to the wart on his ugly nose.

The target Corrano started his stretches and tai chi on the balcony outside his bedroom, slowly working into a rhythm. That balcony also served as the box seat from which he oversaw tortures and executions from time to time, if the reports were to be believed. The Assassin had studied them all carefully, and believed them.

"Stand up nice and straight, asshole," he smiled at the target so highly resolved on his laptop screen.

Corrano obliged, and the Assassin clicked the pointer on the image's hairy chest. The software limned an outline around him, and held it, no matter how the man moved. A brief pause followed while the codes in both the killer drone and the recon drone ran their preloaded subroutines. Target Confirmed flashed on his laptop screen, and almost simultaneously the killer drone's soft voice whispered in his ear.

"Target acquired, engage when ready."

The assassin scrolled to the Execute Auto selection, clicked on it and sat forward in his tree nest, watching the screen intently. The little killer drone folded its wings back and accelerated. Now operating under its own logic scheme, it would react faster and more reliably than his ability to control it from a distance.

Diego Corrano, el Jefe, undisputed leader of the world's foremost cocaine and heroin conglomerate, stretched his arms to the tropical sky, a light sweat building on his skin. He turned east and squinted into the rising sun, unaware of the laser bead steadying down on his hairy chest. The dart followed immediately, burying itself in the hard fat and muscle under the rib cage. The strange warmth of the paralytic blanked out the minor sting of the dart almost before he could feel it. The recon drone showed his face clearly. The target stumbled, confused, as his left side went numb. A dark exultation flooded into the Assassin, hard-edged and cold. El Jefe screamed something into the bedroom behind him as he staggered and turned.

"Hit confirmed," the drone's soft whisper reported to the Assassin.

Corrano collapsed into the arms of a sunburned bald-headed man in jungle fatigues who ran from the bedroom out onto the balcony.

Aviram Glickman, the drug cartel's security chief, from the file photos, the Assassin thought, and laughed quietly.

"Ah, well, why not? Reinforce our message."

The little killer drone executed a steep climb away into a barrel roll for another pass. The genomic toxin, keyed to Corrano, probably wouldn't affect Glickman much, but the paralytic would be nasty while it lasted. The Assassin scrolled to Backup Target and clicked on the security chief's screen image. The software limned an outline. He bypassed the protective checks and clicked Execute Manual.

"No innocents in this place, Avi," he muttered as he headed the drone out of its roll and straight back toward the balcony.

The security chief pulled the dart out of a moaning Corrano, looking at it in amazement. With maybe a sense of motion in his peripheral vision, or maybe just primitive instinct, the man yanked over a table and crouched behind it, blindly firing his pistol sunward and screaming the alert into his lapel mike. It was little use: the targeting software compensated and the dart took him in the cheek.

"Manual execute hit confirmed on backup target," the drone's voice whispered. "Wing damage, implementing reverse course retrieval program."

The little killers had to be retrieved whenever possible; they were fiendishly difficult to replace. So the Assassin tracked it on his laptop, faithfully following its zig-zag programmed return path just above the treetops.

"Shit! It's only making half-speed," he muttered, "this is dangerous. Let's hope they can't see it."

His finger hovered over the Self Destruct command on the laptop. But he couldn't do it. The machine embodied both art and engineering of the highest order. It represented skill and knowledge and other things he once had lived for and still admired. And it was a friend, a fellow hunter, a comrade in arms, more than a machine. A predator, like him.

So he waited patiently, catching his damaged angel of death gently in his arms when it finally arrived. A message sounded instantly in his earphone, relayed from the recon drone above.

"Omega-One, Omega-One, you've been sighted. We have a scramble from the compound, three jeeps headin'south toward your position. And about one klick west we have movement toward you showin' on infrared. Maybe a foot patrol; three or four troops. Withdraw immediately. Repeat, withdraw immediately. Proceed to primary EZ and signal for rendezvous."

"Roger, understood," the Assassin replied. "Heading out. Setting angel to SDC."

He sighed and stuffed additional malleable plastique into the drone body and set it into the crotch of the tree, where its shredded wing material would be invitingly visible from the ground. He toggled the red internal microswitch labeled Self-Destruct on Contact. The drone would detonate thirty seconds after being moved. With any luck at all, it would take out one or more of the security troops, and make

them think twice about ambushes. That should slow them down a little. He slipped the laptop computer in his weapons harness, loaded his backpack, dropped the rope and rappelled to the ground.

He ran at hard lope southward through the jungle along one of the game trails picked out and memorized earlier from the recon graphics. They couldn't track him from their helicopters under the triple canopy, and they couldn't get jeeps down the trails. But the dogs would be a different story, and thinking of that he picked up his pace. He ran for nearly ten minutes before hearing the explosion, muffled through the heavy canopy. He said a brief requiem for his little killer drone.

Running hard now, out of the jungle through a clear area of low shrubs near a gorge, the Assassin finally heard the dogs. No problem, he thought, I'll go downstream and drop the pack on the bank, with a contact detonator. The dogs will go for it and chew it to pieces and blow themselves up for their troubles. That should buy me plenty of time to reach the extraction zone. He put the pack down and loosened the Kevlar vest that also served as a weapons harness. An explosive charge taken from his harness went quickly into the pack, wired with a detonator to fire on a broken circuit. He looked at his watch as he straightened up. Thirty minutes to work westward to the EZ. Plenty of time.

The Assassin was about to turn on his transponder and call in the extraction team when the rifle fire stitched across his partially unprotected back, knocking him into the gorge. As he fell, in what seemed like micro-slow motion, the analytical part of his mind put the shooter at over a quarter-mile. Another random roving patrol, he thought. Ah, shit, with those you just have to take your chances. A lucky shot from a distance. And me with my vest off. Life is all probabilities, isn't it?

John Jacob Connard, former Special Forces soldier, US Army. In the context of this mission, the Assassin. Uncertain professions, both. He had been shot before, and knew the numbness of shock would yield to pain. This time, though, he would be dead before he felt it. A blessing.

He watched the pack fall ahead of him. He saw the sheer drop to the river below, and admired the rising sun sparkling the top of the waterfall as he fell past. Colombia is a beautiful place to die, he thought. Then, as he turned in the air and his view rolled down the gorge, he dropped face-first through foliage growing out the side of the cliff and collided with an explosion of white feathers, a beak digging sharply into his cheek.

A dove's nest. The Assassin silently apologized for the unintended harm as his mind slid into shock. His falling motion seemed to slow to nothing and the cliff wall ballooned out to embrace him. The pain hit, unexpectedly, too early, in a brilliant flash of deep blue light. His vision tunneled, then faded out entirely.

Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, MD | Sunday 0530 EDT

A bit over 2,500 miles north of the Columbian jungle and its jagged cliffs, the night crew for the SDI exercises at Goddard Space Flight Center was just wrapping up, unaware of the Assassin or his activities.

Edwin Edwards, night-shift controller for the exercises, smiled broadly at his crew as he rose from the control chair, congratulating them.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, that was a very good response, on a challenging exercise. This segment is hereby complete. Thank you so much for your hard work and focus. Shift change is coming up. So relax a moment, then get your notes together to brief your day-shift replacements, please.

"And speaking of the day shift... hey, good morning, Aaron. Can't sleep? Or are you just real anxious to get into it?"

Aaron O'Meara, a day-shift player for the exercises, rolled his wheelchair smoothly over the threshold into the big room as he spoke.

"Can I play with the system for a few minutes, sir? While there's a break? I'm wondering if it will still pick up those asteroids we were looking at yesterday afternoon."

"Sure, Aaron, why not? You're here early for your shift, and after all this is basic research." Edwards chuckled as he added "and maybe at some point we'll need to defend ourselves from space as well as from the surface. Disgruntled North Korean asteroid belt miners boosting a few into collision paths, that sort of thing...."

This pleasantly dissolved the remaining tension in the big room, the 'X-Room' at Goddard. The Center as well as each of the team members had a lot vested in the outcome. The two-week long, round-the-clock exercise had been designed to test the ability of satellite sensors to detect, and lasers to destroy, simulated ballistic missiles arcing up out of the atmosphere. The program was still called SDI, Strategic Defense Initiative, a throwback to the Reagan era. A game, here in this time and this place, but possible life and death in the future. Rogue governments. Terrorist groups. More of a concern every day. A brave new world.

The night crew smiled tired greetings at Aaron and stretched weary backs. The controller exited the X-Room and went to relieve the pressure of too much overnight coffee.

Aaron O'Meara, Ph.D, Goddard's most youthful astrophysicist, tapped the keyboard, and the gimbaled sensors on the satellite array swung spaceward. He admired the angled view of the earth's blue envelope on the big screen as the sensors traversed the southern horizon. But then, as the field of vision rotated away from the planet and outward into space, the impossibility appeared. Aaron's breath left his lungs in a whoosh of shock. His professional decorum deserted him.

"Holy shit!" he yelled, "Tracking on! Tracking on! Turn the fucking tracking on!"

But Jack Walton, the tactical tracking technician, had seen it too, and his hands already were flying over the control board. The sensor array on the satellite stopped its traverse.

"History! Plot it, for God's sake, Jack, plot it! Gimme the history! Amy! No, I mean Bill, go find Ed. If he's in the can, get him out of there quick!"

"History plotting, coming up, a few seconds," Walton yelled, fingers flying. Then, anticipating the next commands, "Recording all. Tac computer and mainframe both. Full archival engaged."

The big screen split into two displays. The top one showed double-stranded flaming interwoven spirals; erratic, disjointed motions flashing through space. They watched, fascinated. Jack Walton made the first coherent statement.

"I don't think the digitizer can keep up with those motions."

Aaron was thinking about that when the plot came up on the bottom display, the tactical computer displaying the object's trajectory.

"Jesus, Jack, you may be right. What the hell is that thing? It just came out of nowhere, south of the ecliptic, must be half the distance to the moon. Incredible delta-V's. And it's headed in... Omigod!"

On the top screen, the object bifurcated, a small part dancing with a bigger part, all crazy erratics and transverses and reverses, spiraling explosions of light and motion.

"It's a fucking dog-fight," Walton muttered, fingers flying with the afterthought of instructing the mainframe to increase the scan capture rate.

"Jack, the thing's gonna impact. Gimme a plot projection solved to the earth's surface, can you?"

"Aye sir," Walton said, his old Navy reflex kicking in even though now a civilian who outranked Aaron O'Meara by a huge margin in age and experience. "Coming up."

The team watched in rapt horror as the berserk dance ended in a flash of light and two separate objects hurtled earthward at high velocity.

"Entry coming up," Walton announced. "Larger object projected impact northwest South America, probably Columbia. Smaller object mid-Atlantic coast, US." The plot followed the trajectories, still

erratic and spiraling, but now clearly separate. The projected impact points flickered around on the screen as the computer tried to update solutions to motions outpacing its software. Then probability algorithms kicked in, painting somewhat steadier crimson oval impact zones.

"Delmarva looking likely," Walton amended. "Jesus! Could be this area. At that speed if this thing's got any size to it, we're fucking toast! Brace yourselves!"

Aaron O'Meara slammed home the brake locks on his wheelchair and grabbed the edge of the control console. Tension streamed into the room. Adrenaline levels tracked the two plots on the bottom screen. The objects intersected the atmosphere. The top screen optical showed strangely distorted blue and green flaming patterns in the earth's envelope.

Random thoughts of imminent death ran through ten minds. My children; they have to live. I left dishes in the sink. I wish I had. I wish I hadn't. Now I'll never...

Then, a few seconds later, the patterns abruptly snapped off just as abruptly as they had snapped into being. The crimson ovals of ground-zero impact zones flickered out. The real-time clock above the big screen showed 05:48:01 EDT.

Dead silence filled the X-Room, except for the exhalations of held breath. A few signs of the cross. Then Amy McLaughlin's shaky voice: "Are we dead yet?"

A burst of nervous laughter erupted.

"Because if we're not, I gotta pee."

Edwin Edwards, exercise controller, ran back into the room into the midst of raucous hysteria.

"All right, what the hell is going on?"

Ten voices clamored as one. The controller calmed them.

"Okay, I think I've got it: incoming object, high speed, split in two, one of the projected impacts right here. But I didn't hear a boom. Anybody hear a boom? Feel anything shake? No? So that's good, right? We're all still here, right? So let's all calm down! Jack, can you show us a replay?"

They watched the replay, fascinated. The object just snapped into existence at 05:45:58 EDT, with no hint of any precursor motion. The ensuing division and crazy dance took two minutes and three seconds elapsed time to projected impact, then just as abruptly snapped out of existence. Chattering commentary from ten of the brightest minds in the business peppered the controller as they watched.

"Okay, I don't know what happened here any better than you," Edwards told them, "but we weren't annihilated. I guess we gotta report it. Aaron, come with me, please. The rest of you, please just try to calm down. Reset the satellite to the exercise scenario, and get ready to brief your shift replacements. Jack, would you carve this event out of the data file and tag it as Non-Exercise Anomaly or something? That way anybody interested can fool with it on the backup system down the hall and not interfere with the exercise. We've got a mission here, and it's costing the taxpayer big bucks, so we can't let ourselves get blown off course by this. Although it sure as hell is fascinating. C'mon, Aaron."

In his office, the controller took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

"Aaron, I've got to call this in. I don't even know to whom. But it's clearly something odd enough and seems real enough that I can't just write it off. Now, here's my problem," he enumerated the points on his fingers.

"One. You have this wonderful wacky sense of humor.

"Two. You're far too partial to practical jokes. And so's your buddy Jack Walton.

"Three. You came on shift a half-hour early, wanting to peer into space.

"And four. The next thing you know we've got an invasion of freaking flaming vortices that scares the shit out of everybody.

"So, Aaron, before I go making a public fool out of myself, and possibly even hurting our program here, this would be a good time to tell me it's one of your jokes. We'll all have a real good laugh. Talk for

weeks about how O'Meara suckered us. Again. But there won't be any harm done. You understand?"

Amazement and consternation and hurt flashed in alternating patterns across Aaron's open countenance. He stuttered to get the words out.

"Ed..." he began, but the insistent buzz of a high priority call interrupted. The controller held up his hand.

"Hold it; I gotta take this, Aaron. It's the hot line."

"Sorry to bother you, sir," the Goddard duty officer said, "but we have a priority call from the Pentagon holding. A colonel in the Situation Room over there wants to know since we had the satellite active, did we track any atmospheric anomalies with our SDI arrays. They got a buncha ghosts on east coast radars and some visual sightings of strange stuff in the DC area. They're scrambling some F16s out of Andrews and choppers out of Quantico and Pax River. No ground impacts reported, but Homeland Security is antsy. Helluva whoop-ti-doo, sir, they want to know can we shed any light on it."

"Okay. Tell them we do have something. We'll send it over the secure defense net. Couple of gigabytes, probably. Take us about five minutes to prep it, maybe five to download. Tell them it's about two minutes of digital MPEG. That's m-p-e-g. Give me two minutes to get to the backup X-Room, F117. Patch them in there."

Then, hanging up, "Aaron, I'm sorry. It did seem like a logical question to ask, but unless you're so good a hacker you can also create real effects in the atmosphere, I have to apologize."

Aaron had already deduced the nature of the conversation.

"No impacts or explosions, I take it?"

"Apparently not."

"Ed, no offense taken. Hey, I'm fantastically flattered that you think I could manage to pull off a stunt like this. Wow! What a compliment! Come on, I'll help you set up the files for upload before I report for the exercise. Who wants them, anyway? Isn't this something? I haven't been this excited since I went too wide on the turn down the handicapped ramp in the parking garage..."

Aaron O'Meara's youthful exuberance played counterpoint to his precocious technological knowledge, and he chattered stream-of-consciousness ideas at the controller as he wheeled beside his boss down the hall to the backup X-Room.

C&O Canal Bike Trail, Washington, DC | Sunday 0546 EDT

Legs pumping, heart thumping, sweat rolling down her back, bike tires humming, Lara Picard was in a Zen-like state. Some distant part of her mind efficiently processed details: pace, gearing, braking, twists and turns and occasional discontinuities in the asphalt. The rest of her mind was totally immersed in the present moment: pulsing with the rhythm of her body, devoid of thinking, open to the universe. Fatigue was a distant thing, unimportant. Had she looked at her stopwatch, she would have realized a personal best was imminent on this ride along her favorite bike training route.

She encountered little traffic at this early hour, Washington DC sleeping off its Saturday night excesses on a Memorial Day weekend. A fat full moon illuminated the pre-dawn morning, giving plenty of light to see. The cool air bore a slight humidity. Wispy fog tendrils layered over the river, reminding her of her farm-girl roots. A young healthy organism riding flat out, her soul hummed in tune with the beauty of the river and the bike trail and the sun coming up over the horizon. She became one with the universe, a resonant frequency, on this fine early Sunday morning.

Head down, Lara barely sensed the eerie flashing ahead of her; the trees between the trail and the river mostly shielded it. She never saw the strange spiraling fire in the sky, nor the splash in the water. She only saw, speeding downhill a minute later, the bee's motion at the top of her peripheral vision. She

had no time to react before it flew into her open mouth at full air intake. She tried to cough it out. In an instant of inattention, her front tire caught a rut off the asphalt, and she and the bike were airborne over an embankment. Her perceptions sped up and the world turned in slow motion, as if clicking through freeze-frame images. Impact with the ground came in a brilliant flash of green light as she blanked out.

Inert on a pebbled rocky shelf above a drainage swale, her breathing labored, her body broken and bleeding, Lara's mind sought another place....

God, he's a great lover, she thought, her body still sweating lightly from their exertions. She admired his body in the dim light, sinewy muscle over a bone structure that came as close as she'd ever seen to perfect aesthetic balance. Michelangelo's David, she mused. Or maybe more like those old movies of Bruce Lee when he's in motion. What a wonderful body.

Her lover slept on, a slight smile twitching the corner of his mouth as she knelt by the bed and ran her hand down from shoulder to hip. He gave a tiny moaned exhalation of contentment, but stayed sunk into post-coital relaxation, sound asleep. She nuzzled him gently in the small of the back, whispered how much she loved him, then pulled the sheet up and went to take her shower.

He woke and studied her as she came toweling herself out of the bathroom.

"You are looking exceptionally gorgeous this morning, my love."

"Now, I wonder why that is?" She laughed, toweling off unabashedly in front of him.

He patted the side of the bed.

"Sit down, I think I have an answer. It will make you even more gorgeous, if that's remotely possible...."

"Later, satyr." She laughed again. "I'm going for a bike ride."

"My God, woman, you should be way too tired for a bike ride! Am I not doing my job here? Please let me make amends. I'll really try to do better!"

His good intentions were punctuated by a rising under the sheet, which she studied interestedly.

"Nah, I'm not tired, I'm energized, and I'm going for a bike ride, before the traffic picks up. It's getting light enough outside. You put your head back down on your pillow and have a little snooze, and then you can massage my sore legs and buns when I get back. You know how much we both like that."

"Umm, that's all well and good, but how about a quickie to energize you some more, speed you on your way, make you nice and limber, keep you from getting saddle-sores or something?" He threw off the sheet to more expressively salute the idea.

She felt herself moistening.

"You've already given me saddle-sores, buster. So I'm going to wriggle into my biking shorts... unless... something should just happen to wriggle in before that," she said coyly. "So, hey, catch me if you can, big boy."

She grinned, flipped the towel over his face, and fled to her dressing closet on the other side of the bedroom....

Lara Ellen Picard, lawyer and mother and triathlete and lover, lay inert and bleeding on a shelf of rock between the C&O Canal and the Potomac River. As the morning sun and its heat rose over the tree line, her mind spiraled around and around that erotic event, struggling to pull up more detail. Did it take place this morning, or last Sunday morning?

She couldn't recall. Her mind seemed to have fuzzed into a state of hyperactive unspooling; remembrances and emotions flashed through it as if that most recent memory had been on the surface,

and like the fastened end of a runaway ball of string it was now unwinding other memories. What a strange sensation, she thought. Almost like her consciousness was being unraveled from within her brain. Almost like it was being read into some kind of legal record. Ah, she recognized dimly, that must mean I'm dying.

But as if to counterpoint that thought and thus deny death, the unraveling suddenly reversed. The erotic memory flooded back. An overpowering sense of warmth and love ran alongside passion and spun into the forefront of her consciousness. She saw her lover in a vision so clear and acute it was almost painful.

Passion, she acknowledged fondly, oh yes; but love the far greater part of it. Even with a body in shock and pain, Lara moistened in reaction to her vision, validating once again those elemental forces that exist at the base of the brain and serve to drive life onward. Her mind, beckoned, fled toward those elemental forces. Toward survival.

Author bio:

Lee Denning is the pen name of a father-daughter writing team. Denning Powell has been a soldier, scientist, engineer and entrepreneur.

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Excerpt from **Strange Valley**
sf suspense

By Darrell Bain

Chapter One

The small city of Masterville is located in extreme northern Arkansas, near the border of Missouri in the heart of the Ozark mountain range. It sits at the bottom of a valley which is surrounded by rather large foothills. The hills grow even larger in the distance, rising finally to heights of several thousand feet before turning into rounded mountains, worn down by time. The valley, and the city it enclosed, might never have been noticed, or at least come into public awareness, had it not been for an obscure government clerk who worked as a statistical analyst for the Census Bureau. He was a career civil servant and conscientious to a fault. His name was Harry Beales and he had spent most of twenty years in the same office, sifting data from census figures as if the fate of the nation depended on what he wrought from his tables and graphs and rows of numbers appended to obscure facts. However, the fate of the nation paid Harry no mind until well after the turn of the century, when the Census Bureau computers became sophisticated enough to sift out some anomalies, which Harry then noticed.

Other, more modern computers might have picked up on the figures earlier but Harry had no access to them, and he was the only person in the bureau whose job description specifically directed him to search for unexplainable blips. Even after the new computers were installed, it was several years after the census had been completed before the amoeba-like distribution of data was completed and found its way to Harry's desk. He could then begin the plodding search for unusual facts and figures from the last census that he was responsible for finding.

Give Harry his due. He recognized the first little oddity buried in the wealth of newly updated files and he followed up on it relentlessly. What he saw first was that in the small little city of Masterville, high up in the Ozarks, the national divorce rate didn't seem to apply. There were very few divorces in Masterville. Not only that, as his curiosity was piqued and he looked further, he saw that there weren't that many marriages, either. Both facts were anomalies and Harry was very good at anomalies. That was his job, after all. He searched some more.

Harry thought that the low divorce and marriage rate would indicate a greater percentage of people with different last names living together and that turned out to be the case. He knew from previous census data that as a rule, those households where couples lived together without benefit of marriage should have fewer children in residence, regardless of which parent they belonged to, or whether the offspring belonged to both. That turned out not to be the case; there were more, not less. Apparently the citizens of Masterville cared little for marriage but lots for children. About this time, he noticed that it was near five o'clock, and bureaucrat that he was, he called it a day. The next morning he plodded back to his figures.

During the course of that day, Harry discovered several other disconcerting facts. Following up on family statistics, he keyed into Department of Human Resources files and found that, contrary to his expectations, very few of the unwed mothers in Masterville were on welfare or Medicaid, or ever had been; in fact, most of them lived with the father of their children. This led him back to educational levels, an indication of income. These women had an average of three years of college and an average income even higher than that bit of data should indicate. He thought then that the racial balance in Masterville would be skewed toward a lower percentage of minority groups than average, but again the facts were contrary; the racial classification was about average for that area of the country. By this time Harry began developing a personal rather than a professional interest in the cluster of statistical aberrations. His curiosity was highly aroused, even though he was only doing what he was paid to do. It was simply that his work had finally become interesting rather than routine. He became so involved in his study that he actually put in more than two hours of overtime that day before remembering he was working for nothing. Overtime wasn't authorized in his department. He hastily shut off his computer terminal and locked his little cubbyhole of an office and went home to his statistically normal wife and two children, a boy and a girl.

Usually, being a considerate husband and father, Harry tried to spend some time after work with Bertha, his wife, and John and Mary, their two children. After that, he watched TV, scanning over the several hundred channels his receiver would accept while looking for an interesting program.

This evening though, Harry was distracted. Right after dinner he zapped into a bland, uninteresting movie and left the channel selector alone while his mind wandered. Later, in bed, he found that he couldn't sleep; the problem from work kept intruding. In all his years as a statistical analyst, rising slowly but surely from GS-6 to GS-13, he had never seen anything like the data he had pulled from the computer files over the last two days, and he really didn't know what to do with it. The figures kept turning over in his mind like a school of fish slowly breaking the surface of a tranquil lake, rising and falling back into the depths, leaving only ripples behind. He finally slept, but badly.

The next day being Saturday, Harry was off work, of course. He rose, red-eyed and irritable at his inability to sleep during the night. He showered, shaved, had his usual breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast then went out into his garage and began tuning up the lawnmower. Winter was over and tufts of St. Augustine grass were beginning to send out green tendrils in the front yard.

The mower wouldn't start, perhaps because Harry wasn't paying much attention to what he was doing and didn't tighten the sparkplug securely enough after replacing it. A little later he came back into the house, washed up and informed Bertha that he was going back to the office to catch up on some work. Bertha stared at him. Harry had never gone to work on a Saturday as long as she had known him.

"Harry, dear, is anything wrong?" She asked.

"No, honey," Harry said. "Just a little problem at the office. I'll be back soon."

Before Bertha could question him further Harry departed in their new van, purchased after his last promotion. Once on the way, he drove faster than normal, anxious to get to work for the first time he could remember, notwithstanding that it was his day off and that he certainly couldn't expect to get paid for his time. Nevertheless, he entered his little office and booted up his computer terminal with all the enthusiasm of a four year old turning on Saturday morning cartoons.

Harry did not return home soon. Once ensconced at his desk he forgot all about what time it was. Following up on the facts he had already gathered, he flung his net wider and discovered that his data applied not only to Masterville, but to surrounding towns and villages, spilling out into the broad

valley for miles around before beginning to taper off to more normal findings.

Once he had the anomalous area pretty well mapped, Harry began a search for other statistical aberrations within the plat. They were not hard to find, once he began looking, and knew what he was looking for. Crime seemed to be almost nonexistent in the valley and the surrounding area. Masterville had never accepted any government grants for parks or sewer systems, no government money to maintain or develop historical sites or any of the other programs congressmen were so fond of grabbing for their districts to help them get reelected. Federal and state welfare programs were being utilized hardly at all. Masterville College, a private school, had never accepted a government grant. Both of the Masterville hospitals, and its single nursing home, operated entirely without government funds, not even Medicare reimbursement.

Indeed, neither would have been reimbursed by the government because they had never applied for Medicare or Joint Commission accreditation, a prerequisite for government help. Harry checked and found that both hospitals and the nursing home were inspected by the state, but that was all, as if the directors did only the minimum required by law.

This fact led Harry to check on the public schools. None of them were registered with the federal nutrition program or for school lunch funding or any other federal or state program other than those specifically prescribed by law.

This induced Harry to search out income distribution for the whole population, not just the plethora of unwed mothers. He found that income followed a normal bell-shaped curve, but the curve itself was shifted somewhat to the right when compared with national figures.

Valley residents earned more, on average, than would be expected for that area of the country and its industries. Home ownership also turned out to be much higher than in other parts of the nation, though he was hard put to find much financing by government programs. The local banks appeared to hold most of the mortgages on homes in the valley. These facts made him wonder whether he had misread the minority population statistics. He went back to them.

No, they were about normal for that area of the country, but the minorities in Masterville seemed to get along unusually well in life, as if no one there cared about their color or origin or religion. That didn't seem right, given the contrariness of human nature, but when he delved into other files he was accumulating at an astounding rate, he could find very few instances of discrimination suits or racial unrest, not as far back as he could check. In fact, he could find very few lawsuits of any kind when he decided to check into that area of Masterville's business and sent out electronic feelers for the data. Stranger and stranger, he said to himself, as intrigued as a small boy who has just discovered tadpoles or garden snakes.

The next thing Harry delved into was religious affiliation, and there he soon found another glaring blip. The most common religious preference of the inhabitants appeared to be "none." Although that was implied data rather than hard figures, since a number of people typically marked none on their census forms. But he also determined the fact that there was a dearth of churches in Masterville. There were far fewer than usual for a city squarely in the middle of the "Bible Belt" of America, an area stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Midwest, where religion played a great role in most communities and the lives of their citizens.

By the time Harry had pulled all these bits from the files he had gathered, he was becoming excited. There seemed to be no end to the phenomena. At this point, impelled to action by all the statistical abnormalities, Harry did something which was specifically forbidden to government employees: he began looking into political affiliations. In order to get into this area, he had to use a few techniques which were generally known but almost never used by the computer operators. The techniques bordered on the illegal.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't have thought of doing such a thing, but by this time he was far gone in his research. He hooked into the voting rolls of Masterville County and discovered that a very high percentage of registered voters listed themselves as independent rather than giving a party affiliation. Feeling guilty, he began checking local, state and national election results from Masterville. He found that most of them, and most especially the local elections, had all been very one-sided, almost as if the citizens had agreed beforehand on what the results should be or whom they should vote for.

Harry worked most of the day. He turned up other peculiarities, none of which would have caused alarm taken alone, but added to all the other oddities about the valley, were disconcerting to a degree. Average life span was several years longer than in the rest of the state or nation. Illegal drug use was very low. Enlistment in the armed services was high, though there appeared to be few military retirees from Masterville on government rolls. Interracial marriages, where there were marriages, were high. Most residents had been born in the valley, and apparently intended to die there. It took a while to ferret out the data from obscure sources, but Harry found that Masterville apparently did not cater to the tourist trade. There were few motels or hotels in the area, unusual for being so near other highly rated vacation spots.

This last datum made Harry wonder how the residents of Masterville supported themselves. It took a while but eventually he discovered that the little city supported many cottage industries specializing in products which were usually imported from overseas. Masterville charged higher prices but produced such quality goods and niche items that they found a ready market. He smiled to himself when he found that one little factory employing a dozen or so persons was making a good profit by hand sewing shirts in the old sizes of neck and arm length rather than the three standards from overseas, small, medium and large. Harry remembered gritching to Bertha about how he could never find a shirt that fit right anymore. He happily book-marked that data for his personal use later. Someone in Masterville was making a good living supplying that want, it seemed, and he intended to add his business to their list of customers.

There were more bookstores per capita in Masterville than would be expected, and fewer Movie theaters and game rooms. The city supported a publishing house which specialized in books of fiction and nonfiction which didn't quite fit the mold of the big New York Houses, and checking their web site, Harry saw that they were making no attempt to imitate the giants; they simply looked for good literature to publish, and were doing so at a profit, though few best sellers had come from their presses. There were also a couple of ebook publishers with thousands of titles in each of their catalogs.

It went on and on, but finally Harry had to call a halt. He had skipped lunch entirely and it was already past time for dinner. Reluctantly, he shut down his computer then locked up and went home.

Bertha insisted that Harry stay home and attend church with her Sunday morning and mow the lawn that afternoon. Harry would much rather have been in his office sitting at his work station, but he did as she asked. Besides, he needed time to think about what to do with his findings, and the monotonous rounds of the mower (which he had fixed) gave him leeway to consider the problem.

Masterville and the valley in which it sat was a strange place indeed if his data was accurate, and he had no reason to doubt that it was. By the time the yard was mowed level and Harry came in for dinner he thought he could sum up his thoughts in one short sentence: Masterville was just too good to be true. There must be something wrong there, though for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what it might be. He just knew that such serene, peaceful prosperity as the valley seemed to typify was as out of place in present day America as an oil derrick on the White House lawn. He made up his mind to see someone about it, which he did on Monday morning.

* * *

Harry Beales should have had a place in the history books, or at least a footnote for being the first to uncover the gentle mantle of peace and prosperity hovering over Masterville Valley, but he was after all only a GS-13 clerk and his role in the subsequent investigation was soon forgotten by those higher in the hierarchy of government service. Perhaps Harry would have wanted it that way. Once he turned his findings over to others, he went back to working his normal hours and channel surfing from his easy chair and mowing the lawn on Saturday mornings. Eventually he put the whole episode out of his mind and didn't think of it again until it became national news. Others did no such thing.

Chapter Two

"I don't get it," Daniel Stenning said as he finished reading the condensed version of the Masterville data. He tapped an impatient finger on top of the stack of papers. He looked around the table to see if anyone else agreed with him. Besides himself, there were three other persons in the NSA briefing room located in the bowels of the headquarters building in Washington. Opposite him, the FBI liaison shrugged, but said nothing. To his right was a woman, an NSA field agent like himself, but one whom he had never met. She ignored him and continued perusing the report.

"What is it you don't get, Daniel?" his boss asked. Mandel Crafton had a chisled face and hard flinty eyes that he used like a weapon.

"First of all, I don't see what this business has to do with national security. And second, why is it stamped secret?" He tapped the papers again. "Most of the data here is available to anyone who cares to sift through the census statistics or look it up on the web."

Crafton's eyes focused on Daniel like an invisible laser, hunting for a hint of insubordination. He hadn't wanted him on this case; though mild-mannered, the agent was far too successful at his work for Crafton to think of him as anything other than a potential competitor. Better to use someone like Shirley there, whose loyalty to him was unquestionable. She had already pinned her career to his rising star. However, he hadn't had a say in Stenning's presence. His own superior had specifically ordered him to assign him to the case. Given Stenning's previous history of successful operations, it made him believe his boss already thought there were wider implications to the assignment than he had voiced, and wanted one of the best field agents on it right from the start.

"It's not up to field agents to question an operation, Daniel. And as far as the secrecy goes, no one else other than that little stat clerk and his superior have made all these connections. They have been ordered to stay silent until we determine what's going on here."

"But why? I don't see anything about Masterville that's really earthshaking. So what if the population is a little different? From what I've heard, some of those communities up in the Ozarks and Appalachians have been inbred for generations. Maybe that's the reason. Besides, they seem to be getting along fine as they are and not hurting anyone. Why go in and make people start wondering about it?"

"Maybe too fine," Shirley Rostervik said from beside him. She turned to him and smiled to take the sting out of the contradiction before addressing Crafton directly. Daniel sensed a layer of incipient sexuality beneath the smile, but it did little for him, even as attractively blond and slim as the other field agent was. Sometimes he wondered about himself.

Crafton allowed himself to return Shirley's smile as she continued. "There's something strange

about that place. Just look at the gradient map." She pulled a sheet of paper from the bottom of her stack and pushed it to the center of the table. It contained a map of northern Arkansas and southern Missouri, the heart of the Ozark mountain range.

"See here, the anomalies begin tapering off the further away from Masterville you go. After thirty or forty miles, you can't tell any difference from the normal population. It's almost as if that city and valley are at the center of an epidemic."

"If it's an epidemic, it's been going on for a hell of a long time," Daniel said. "Previous censuses show the same pattern once you begin looking for it."

"That's the point," Crafton interjected. "Whatever those people are up to, it is part of a long range plan. Perhaps a conspiracy."

"I really can't see where they're up to anything, much less having a plan," Daniel said, dropping his copy of the report onto the table in front of him. He reached for the coffee pot and poured himself a refill. Crafton might be a bastard, but his coffee was always excellent.

"That's enough, Dan. Our superiors think there's some phenomenon there worth looking into and that's all we need to know. You and Shirley have been assigned to the case. You're to go in there, posing as tourists and find out what's going on."

"It seems to me we already know what's going on."

"Enough, I said."

Daniel shrugged. He had said what he thought and was willing to let it go at that. If the powers that be wanted him to go undercover into a happy, prosperous little valley and unobtrusively question its inhabitants, then he would do it, and do a thorough job while he was there. He looked across the table at the FBI liaison agent. "Is the FBI going in, too?"

Crafton answered, looking smug. "No, it was just the first agency notified. When the Attorney General refused them a writ, the problem was passed along to us."

No wonder the Federal agent looked so glum, Daniel thought. All he was there for was as a hanger-on, just in case something illegal turned up that fell under his agency's jurisdiction. That government clerk, Harry something-or-other, must have gone to the FBI first, or his superior had. But then the problem had been passed on to the National Security Agency, and given the paranoia of President Smith, it was no wonder an investigation had been ordered. Well, whatever else, the operation would get him out of the stifling weather of Washington and up into the mountains where it was cool. And perhaps there was a phenomenon in that valley not as benign as he imagined, though he couldn't begin to think of what it might be.

"We're going to need some more information," Shirley said, "Like the names of all the prominent citizens, addresses and workplaces and so forth."

"I'll have it for you tomorrow morning, along with your orders," Crafton said. "In the meantime, let's move on. As Daniel said, this business has been going on as far back as census figures go." He looked down at a sheaf of papers in front of him, thumbed through the stack, then glanced back up. "For instance, in the Civil War Arkansas was a slave state, yet records show that most of the men from around Masterville served on the Union side. Not only that, very few slave owners lived in the area at the time. Doesn't that strike anyone as strange?"

Daniel thought about it. "Not really. The valley is located up in the mountains, not a good place for large plantations. That's where most slave labor was used."

Crafton tossed it back at him. "Records show a normal proportion of slave owners outside the valley. Besides, according to news accounts of the day, sentiment in the valley was overwhelmingly pro-union."

Daniel shrugged. He didn't think that meant much, especially if the valley people shared a common heritage, something yet to be determined.

Shirley spoke up again while brushing a strand of fine blond hair away from her forehead. "Here's the anomaly I think is the most significant: the valley is smack in the middle of the Bible Belt, yet most of the population apparently has no religious preference. Now why should that be? It doesn't compute."

"That's one of the things you're going to find out," Crafton said.

"Why?" Daniel asked. "Or rather, let me put it this way: Wouldn't nosing into people's religious beliefs get us into Constitutional questions?" He didn't bother mentioning that not only did he have no opinion one way or another on the existence of God, he thought all religions were rather silly and had never understood why anyone would believe in them.

Crafton stared at him, then answered, "We've already gotten a legal opinion on that. There's no conflict so long no attempt is made to change or influence beliefs. Mr. Phillips is very interested in the why, though."

Daniel had never met Murray Phillips, the NSC director, but he knew of him. Like many of the current cabinet members subject to Congressional confirmation, he was an avowed, born again Christian. With congress edging ever further toward the philosophy of the religious right, and President Smith already there, it was hard for any other type candidate to pass muster.

Worse, in Daniel's opinion, four new Supreme Court justices of the same ilk had been appointed over the last several years and the court was now delicately balanced on the issue of separation of church and state.

Daniel thought that something like the present investigation, especially with Phillips in charge, might well tip the balance if the proclivities of the valley residents became public. He couldn't help wondering, though, why such a high proportion of non-religious folks should be concentrated in that one area. Perhaps there really was something wrong there, but he decided not to comment any further and simply wait and see what turned up. After that he would decide. Over the years he had rarely prejudged a case. Sometimes he thought he had been born a natural skeptic.

Crafton gazed at Daniel as if his eyes could bore holes into him, then dropped his scrutiny back to the stack of forms in front of him. He shuffled the papers for a moment then looked back up. "I think that's about it for now. Daniel, you and Shirley get together this afternoon and get your stories together so you won't contradict each other. Probably it would be best to pose as a married couple."

Daniel caught the beginning of a smile from Shirley. Her beauty irritated him for no reason he could discern. He thought of telling Crafton that he preferred to work alone, then abandoned the idea. The cover would be reasonable in the situation, a married couple on vacation. He just hoped the investigation wouldn't take that long. He began picking up his copies of the background analysis.

Shirley's smile brightened. "Shall we have lunch and get started while we eat?" She knew of Daniel only by his reputation. Now she decided he was handsome, too, with that short reddish brown hair and long-lashed brown eyes. He was tall as well, and she liked that in a man.

Daniel glanced at his watch and saw that it was nearly noon. He shrugged. "May as well. Any preference?"

"I know a place."

"Let's go, then." He was already thinking of a reason why, as a married couple on vacation, they would be lingering in the unobtrusive little city of Masterville.

Just as they were about to leave, a briefing officer called them back. They spent an impatient hour with him, including ten minutes when Daniel joined him outside for a cigarette break. Afterwards, they were presented with some facts and figures about Masterville not mentioned in the initial brief, and were given Credit cards for the Operation.

* * *

Daniel left his car in the parking garage and let Shirley drive. He raised his brows at her when she stopped by a Lucullan Deluxe and popped the two front doors open.

"I picked the right parents," she said, sliding into the driver's seat.

Daniel went around to the open passenger's door and seated himself. The new car smell of leather and plastic, oil and paint, upholstery and polish were as pleasant as he remembered it from years ago, but the distinctive odor was long gone from his little hybrid Ford Kitten, an aptly fuzzy name for its environmental friendliness, although he had bought it for fuel economy rather than a deep concern over global warming or ozone levels. Personally, he would much rather be driving a big, well-cushioned vehicle like Shirley's Lucullan than his own, but they cost so much that he declined in favor of investing his money.

"Nice car," he told Shirley as she drove away, heading east. Daniel hoped she didn't pick an inordinately expensive place to eat. Once they received their orders and an expense sheet from Crafton, it wouldn't matter, but right now he didn't feel like spending three times what the food was worth in one of the trendy Washington restaurants.

"Thanks. This little dive we're going to doesn't look like much, but the burgers are good."

"Burgers? Somehow that doesn't go with a Lucullan."

"Not to worry; we're eating at Marvin's because I know it's just been swept for bugs. I finished up a case there yesterday."

"How come you're being reassigned so soon?"

Shirley shrugged. "Guess they thought I'd fit the Op, same as you. Crafton may act like an ass sometimes, but he knows what he's doing."

"That he does," Daniel agreed, remembering a bust he had been in on with Crafton. It had gone down bad but his boss never lost his cool, even with one of his agents down and another wounded. Daniel couldn't even remember him raising his voice as he gave orders in a clear, concise voice devoid of even a tinge of emotion, much less hysteria. Too bad he was so insecure that he worried about underlings upstaging him, he thought, then wondered where he had learned that bit of data. He couldn't remember anyone saying anything like that. He turned it over in his mind for a moment then dismissed the thought as something dredged up from his subconscious, unprovable and therefore meaningless.

* * *

Marvin's café did look like a dive from the outside, but once past the entrance it turned into a clean, neat diner, with numerous alcoves set with tables and comfortable chairs with armrests. Daniel pulled a chair back for Shirley and held it for her while she sat down.

"No one has done that for me in years. You must have been brought up in the south."

"Guilty. Mostly Texas, as a matter of fact. Sometimes my attitude gets me in trouble, though. Not all women like the little amenities."

"I don't mind. I've been called a bitch before, but I can't find a thing wrong with good manners."

Daniel seated himself, wondering again why he felt no attraction toward the agent. He felt as if he should have, given her blond good looks and a figure which was slim but possessed perfectly adequate curves. It was a puzzle he had run across before and still didn't know the answer to. He certainly wasn't gay; it was just that some women turned him on and some didn't. Shirley apparently was one of the

latter. Well, it would make working together much simpler, assuming she didn't get the hots for him.

He let Shirley do the ordering, a relatively simple affair since all Marvin's served were hamburgers in various guises. He asked for a Coors draft beer to go with it. Shirley asked for white wine. The drinks were there within a minute or two of ordering.

As soon as the waiter was out of hearing, Daniel leaned forward and asked a direct question. "What do you think of all this?"

He got an enigmatic smile in return. "Actually, I don't have a clue. It should be damned interesting, though. I can't wait to meet some of those people in Masterville. They seem too good to be true, somehow."

"There is that," Daniel admitted, "but I still can't see where national security is being compromised."

"Well, you know what the grapevine says about our leader: he sees a conspiracy against America under every rock, and Phillips aids and abets the paranoia."

"Yeah, I've heard that, but who knows, really?"

"It seems pretty obvious if you follow politics at all. Bobby Lee is a slick one; he lets Congress do his dirty work, then just signs the bills and gives them all the credit." The media had tagged President Smith with a shortened version of Robert E. Lee Smith during the presidential campaign.

"I don't follow politics much."

"You should. The country is moving way too far toward the fundamentalist religious agenda. It's getting scary. You didn't hear me say that, though."

Daniel nodded and smiled mirthlessly. Shirley was going to stay on the good side of Crafton and Crafton was staying on the good side of Murray Phillips. The NSA director would prefer a theocracy rather than a democracy, or so it was bandied about among lower echelon agents. As for himself, he simply tried to do his job as well as possible and avoid politics, office and national both, just as he had done in the Marines.

Daniel drew a finger across his lips in a zipping motion just as their food arrived. He took a bite of his burger and raised his brows in appreciation. As soon as he had the burger a few bites along, he asked, "Does posing as a married couple in Masterville suit you?"

"So long as it's a pose. You?"

"Crafton had the right idea. A married couple on vacation is likely to arouse the least suspicion. We may have problems finding a place to stay, though. There seems to be a dearth of motels around that city."

"Terrell told me there's a bed and breakfast listed right in the city. Why don't we try there?" Terrell was the briefing officer who had called them back before they left the agency.

"Suits me. Do you have a number for them?"

"Yup. Wrote it down while I was going over all the data sheets. Here, you call." She handed him a slip of paper with a phone number below the notation, Ruthanne's Bed and Breakfast.

"Okay." Daniel pulled out the new credit card he had been issued. "I'm still listed as Daniel Stenning. What does yours say?"

Shirley set her wind glass down and rummaged in her purse. She held up the new card and chuckled. "It appears that we got married while talking to Terrell. I'm Shirley Stenning now."

"Sounds good." Daniel pulled his phone out and dialed. A few moments later they had reservations for a week, beginning three days from the present, time enough for the drive to Masterville Valley.

"That was easy, Dan. How does it feel to be suddenly married?" Shirley said, giving him a Cheshire Cat grin that promised further teasing if the assignment didn't become too serious.

Daniel simply nodded. He had never been married, even as a cover. This operation promised to be interesting in more ways than one.

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Author Bio

Darrell Bain is the author of about two dozen books, in many genres, running the gamut from humor to mystery and science fiction to non-fiction and a few humorous works which are sort of fictional non-fiction, if that makes any sense. He has even written for children. For the last several years he has concentrated on humor and science fiction, both short fiction, non-fiction (sort of) and novels. He is currently writing the fourth novel in the series begun with *Medics Wild*.

Darrell served thirteen years in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, *Medics Wild*. Darrell has been writing off and on all his life but really got serious about it only after the advent of computers. He purchased his first one in 1989 and has been writing furiously ever since.

While Darrell was working as a lab manager at a hospital in Texas, he met his wife Betty. He trapped her under a mistletoe sprig and they were married a year later. Darrell and Betty own and operate a Christmas tree farm in East Texas which has become the subject and backdrop for many of his humorous stories and books.

Author web site:

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Excerpt from **The Casebook of Doakes and Haig**
collection of fantasy detective stories

By Patrick Welch

Foreword

Mystery and fantasy may appear to be unlikely bedfellows. A typical mystery, after all, relies on logic and analysis to establish and maintain the story line. Fantasy requires imagination and suspension of disbelief if it is to hold the reader's interest.

Yet there are precedents for "fantasy detectives" if you will (ignoring the obvious that Sherlock Holmes and other fictional characters are in a very real sense always "fantasy"). If you wish, you can go as far back as Poe's "Murders on the Rue Morgue" to cite a "fantastic" mystery. I prefer to go no further than Randall Garrett's series with Lord Darcy and Master Sean. These characters and their alternative universe are direct inspirations for Mssrs. Doakes and Haig, who reside and practice in a universe of their own, an England which remains a colonial power around the world.

Investigating and expanding their particular reality has been a delight for me. It has also been a continuing matter of discovery as I have chronicled their adventures over the five stories and one novelette in this collection. Four of their cases - A Small Matter of Murder, Savage Customs, Murderous Obligations and Cat's Moon Rising - have appeared in *Alternate Realities*. In completing this anthology, I have slightly revised the earlier episodes to correspond to what has developed later in the backgrounds of the characters, specifically Mr. Haig.

Sharp-eyed readers of those stories might catch these minor revisions. For me, revising is a never-ending process in any event. I doubt there is one piece of writing I have ever published that, when I read it in print or on the 'net or wherever, I didn't want to go back and tweak this or that. And I suspect most writers are the same way.

Anyway, you're probably eager to get into the actual casebook of Doakes and Haig.

"A Small Matter of Murder"

The tinkle of the bell roused me from my crossword puzzle. I glanced at the clock as I made my way from the back room to the front of my store. Only two hours had passed since my last customer ...this was turning into a good day after all. I paused at the curtain to straighten my coat and don my friendliest smile, then parted it to greet my visitor.

My smile widened when I saw Mrs. McLeary. As regular as clockwork she was, once a month making her painful way from the upper West End to my little shop. "And how are we this lovely day?" I asked as I reached for a jar of Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener.

"It's this hip," she patted her left side. "The rheumatism does rage like the wind on damp days like this."

I carefully wrapped the jar of condiment in newspaper before setting it in a box. "If you wish we could post your order each month. Save you the trip and all."

"I don't mind. A body does need to get out on occasion." She reached forward and pinched my cheek. "So like your father you are, bless his soul." She carefully set seven pence on the counter. "He would be proud he would. Children these days, so eager to fly out on their own. Never mind the family or tradition. Shame it is."

"Indeed." I maintained my smile until the door closed softly but surely behind her. Mrs. McLeary, bless the dear old lady, had yet to realize after all these years prices for everything had inevitably and inexorably risen. I didn't have the heart to ask for more, being as she was on a fixed income and all, but I knew I would hear about it anyway.

I set the seven pence in the cash register where they could safely enjoy their near solitude, then studied my reflection in the polished silver of the old machine. Children indeed. Thirty-five I was now, looking every day of it and more. Just so I could carry on the "family tradition." I glanced at the clock once more. Just past two. I could be confident I would see no more customers for at least another hour. Preparing myself for what was to come, I went to the back to talk with Haig.

As per usual, he was hard at work in the kitchen. On the stove a huge kettle boiled merrily away, reducing a leg of lamb to bits of meat and suet. Sprigs of fresh wintergreen, clover, thistle leaves and lavender were piled high on the table waiting to be blended with the fat. Several boxes of clear glass bottles - which cost me nearly six pence each - rested safely on the floor. At his bench, glasses perched high on his head, feet dangling several meters from the ground, Haig was busy pouring a fresh batch of Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener into a pint container. "How much did you sell?" he asked, not looking up.

"Just one container. Mrs. McLeary."

"So the old cow is still alive! And what did you charge her this time?"

"The usual." Here it comes.

The leprechaun turned and glared at me over his glasses. He looked so ludicrous; not a hand high, dressed in wool waistcoat and trousers, the tools he worked with as large or larger than he. How he did it I knew not and he refused to say, in fact refused to allow me to watch him at work. Somehow he managed. "How many times have I told you, boyo? Money. We need money!" and he rubbed his fingers together.

He was right about that. "Yes, so you have."

"Never do, never do," he turned his back to concentrate on his work. "Your father and grandfather, they understood. You, you have no more sense than the poorest inmate in Debtor's Prison."

"Better a little than none at all."

"Bah! If your father could see what you're doing to his business, he would turn over in his grave yes he would!" He continued muttering as he forced the stopper into the full bottle, then made a gesture. And another bottle of Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener was ready for market. If there was one.

"People's tastes have changed. They eat healthier meals ..."

"Healthier? Hah!" He jumped up on his chair and stretched to his full height. "Rabbits they be if rabbits they eat like. Look at me! I eat Doakes and Haig everyday! I'm as healthy as a horse!" He pounded his chest for emphasis.

"You're a leprechaun."

"What of it?"

I shook my head. We had had this discussion before. Years gone by, our concoction of lamb fat, some herbs and a touch of Haig's magic graced the tables of the rich and noble throughout the land. Now we would probably never get to market if Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener wasn't already recognized and honored as a purveyor to the crown. If the Health Office ever bothered to check ... "I'm

sure we have enough," I said as I pointed to the shelves along the back. They were sagging from unsold bottles of our single product. "You can relax if you wish."

"That's the trouble with you, you are always ready to 'relax.'" But he did pause long enough to fill and light his pipe. Another health code violation to be sure. "When I agreed to work with your father, I could have never imagined the future would look like this."

I suppressed a smile at his choice of words. The story of how my great-great-great-and so on grandfather had captured the creature had been passed down and embellished by my family for generations. We had been dirt poor, so the latest version went, and forced to live in a cave while greatXgrandfather went out hunting and stealing and poaching. Luck of the Irish indeed when he stumbled upon Haig drunk and asleep on the moors. But not so lucky, either; for a leprechaun, Haig had a remarkably small pot of gold. Instead of wealth, then, it was work that Haig offered for his eventual freedom.

I admit he earned it. He had turned an old family recipe (and how we had first stumbled across it I'll never know) into something that was actually edible. My greatXgrandfather had first sold it to several pubs in the area, then to establishments in the nearby cities. It was happenstance and luck that grand-ancestor Doakes crossed paths with one of the King Georges during a periodic spot of bother. As a reward for his assistance, the King named Doakes and Haig a Supplier to the Crown ...and the family fortune was established.

Yet Haig stayed on, passed on from one generation to the next like a family heirloom. Which, in a sense, he was. "You are free to leave at any time." It was an offer I had made more than once, especially as the "family fortune" was dissipating rapidly.

"I live up to my obligations," he sent an angry puff of smoke toward the ceiling. "Best you do the same."

"Indeed." The bell from the front precluded further discussion. Instead I pointed to our inventory. "Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. We don't want to be disposing of unsold stock that has spoiled."

"Doakes and Haig never spoils." I did notice with some satisfaction that he had put his feet up on the table as I went to service our customer. It would probably be our last of the day.

* * *

The distressing news came the next morning. We were in our apartment above the store. Once we had shared six rooms; now I rented out four to cover expenses. But it wasn't enough. I was morosely going over the accounts trying to decide how to juggle the bills this month when a snort from Haig interrupted me. He was standing on the kitchen table, the newspaper spread below him. He was walking atop one article. "A shame, a most grievous shame," he said when he realized he had my attention.

"What is?"

"Mrs. McLeary is no longer with us."

"What?" I grabbed for the paper and nearly knocked him to the floor.

"Relax, boyo," he said as he regained his balance, then adjusted his waistcoat. "Says right here," he pointed with a foot.

He was right. The article described a break-in that had occurred early evening last. A Mrs. Liam McLeary was found dead in her apartment, all valuables missing. The bobbies had no leads. A wake would be held within two days. "Who would do such a thing?" I said after I regained a semblance of composure.

"A hooligan from the Colonies most likely. Uncivilized they are; we should never allow them to

return. They left once, be done with them." Haig stomped his foot for emphasis.

That was Haig's explanation for every spot of trouble, from scuffles with Spain to wars with Argentina and Sweden: somehow, some way, the American colonists were to blame. "I'll have to go."

He frowned. "To the Colonies?"

"To the wake." I read the article once more. "We'll have to close for a few hours; the wake is in the afternoon." I was surprised when he offered no protest. Although he did make a surprising request.

So two days later I knocked on the door of the late Mrs. McLeary. It opened slowly and two eyes peered out. "Who are you?" the woman asked.

I removed my hat and bowed. "Sean Doakes. I was a friend of Mrs. McLeary. I just wanted to visit for a moment and pay my respects."

"Sean Doakes?" The half-hidden face considered. "I don't know ...of course!" and the door flew open, revealing a very attractive woman of about 25. "Mr. Doakes, please do come in," and she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the room. "My grandmother used to talk about you all the time! I'm Colleen Wickes."

"A pleasure, Mrs. Wickes."

"Miss. Please, just call me Colleen."

"Delighted."

"May I take your coat?" I handed it to her gratefully. "You can put your satchel by the wall if you wish."

"No, thank you." I slung it over my shoulder. "I prefer to keep it with me. Force of habit." Inside was Haig; it was the way we traveled when he had a mind to "stretch his legs." He never complained about the accommodations so I didn't, either.

"If you wish. Let me introduce you to the family." I was treated to a whirlwind of grieving names and faces, mostly family and neighbors. The men were drinking, the women weeping; I participated in a few toasts and sobs, then made a break for the kitchen and a spot of tea.

I broke in on a conversation between Colleen and a very well-dressed gentleman. He frowned when he saw me. I apologized immediately.

Colleen was clearly relieved at my intrusion. "Sean, Mr. Doakes, please meet Barrister Weems."

Reluctantly we approached and shook hands. With one glance at my worn trousers and frayed collar he dismissed me as someone worth forgetting immediately. "You have my offer," he returned his attention to Colleen. "It is more than fair. Considering the circumstances, I'm not sure how long my client will maintain his interest." With that he nodded to us both and left the room.

I apologized again. "I was just looking for a spot of tea."

"Delighted." She managed a smile but I could see the tension in her lips. "I think she keeps her supplies here." She opened a cupboard door, but instead of tea there was jar after jar of Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener. At least three years' worth. I let out a low whistle; Colleen looked at me, then the jars, then smiled. "She did love your product so, poor dear. But the last few years, her health. The doctors insisted she watch her diet. Let's try another cabinet, shall we?"

While she continued opening doors I stared at the larder. Every month she had made that long, painful carriage ride to my store. Just to buy something she couldn't enjoy, couldn't really afford. I wiped a tear from my eye; it took Colleen three tries before she got my attention. "Cream? Sugar?"

"Yes. Both." The hot tea brought my ruminations back to the here and now. "What was that all about? If I may be so bold?"

"Barrister Weems represents Malcolm Crosley. He has been trying to buy my grandmother's property for the past year or so. There was no reason to sell before. Now?" She shrugged. "I suppose there's no reason not to."

"Yes." We finished our drinks in silence. The distress I had felt over the news of her death was now trebled by my discovery in dear Mrs. McLeary's kitchen. And, not being family, I did not want to wear out my welcome. So less than ten minutes later I was returning home in a carriage.

I was lost in reminiscing when I felt a kick. Haig was demanding my attention so I unclasped my satchel and looked inside. "What is it? Can't we wait until we get back?"

"I like this naught," he said, then climbed out and sat on my knee.

"Like what? The satchel? There was really no need ..."

"Not that. That Weems fellow. Something is not right here. This smells like Liverpool on a hot summer's day."

He had heard everything, which didn't surprise me since leprechauns have extraordinary hearing. He was right; something didn't smell right to me, either. And it was much stronger than rotting fish. "So what do we do about it?"

He told me. That afternoon I made an appointment to meet with Barrister Weems.

The barrister didn't recognize my name, but when I told him I had some property to sell he reluctantly agreed. Promptly at 10 the next morning I was sitting in his well-appointed office. In the satchel next to me were the deed to my property, relevant tax and income information ...and Haig.

Weems greeted me perfunctorily when I was admitted to his inner chamber and gave no indication he remembered me from the McLeary wake. "You say you have some property you might be interested in disposing of, Mr.," he glanced down at the calendar on his desk, "Doakes?"

"Yes." I casually reached into my satchel and pulled out some papers. I also made sure to knock it over on its side. "Been in the family for generations. But my business is not what it used to be. I am considering relocating to the Colonies."

He accepted the paperwork and glanced at it quickly. "Doakes and Haig. I believe I have heard of the name."

"Our product has been enjoyed by royalty for generations."

"Indeed. I may have a client who would be interested," he offered after five minutes of silence. "But I will have to contact him."

"Of course." I rose and offered my hand. "I will leave the papers with you. Will a day be sufficient? I would hate to have them out of my possession any longer."

"A bit rushed, perhaps, but we can make a preliminary estimate of property value at least. Tomorrow at 10 then?"

"Yes. And thank you." I was whistling as I left. Haig had had ample time to escape and hide; tomorrow morning I would retrieve him.

Which I did, but not before enduring a sales lecture from Weems. "Your business is failing rapidly," he explained the obvious. "You have a mortgage on your property and it is not in the best condition. Only the location makes it of any interest to my client." He handed me a slip of paper. "This is his one and only offer."

I looked at the figure, let out a low whistle, then stuck it in my pocket. "I was hoping for much more than that."

"It is more than fair considering."

"I respectfully decline. If you would." I held out my hand and he returned my deed and other papers. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Haig dart back inside my satchel. I placed my documents carefully around him and closed my case. "Thank you for your time and expert opinion."

"If you change your mind the offer will remain open for one week. Oh, and I will post my consulting

fee on the morrow. Good day, Mr. Doakes." I winced as I made my way outside. I had not expected a fee. It would be dear, I knew.

"Weems is as low as a mine rat!"

We were now safely in my apartment, ensconced over dinner, the day's work done. Haig had steadfastly refused to discuss any of what he had learned while we were open for business, afraid perhaps I would use it as an excuse to do no work. Now he was nearly bursting to tell me.

"Aren't most barristers?"

"Let us not profane an entire profession from one poor example."

"Sorry. Go on."

"I spent the entire night going through his files. Weems is indeed representing Crosley. They are attempting to purchase that entire block of buildings, including Mrs. McLeary's, for some new venture Crosley is planning. Much of it they already own. But the others..." He stopped to refill his pipe. He had become so animated he was nearly hidden by the tobacco cloud.

"Others?"

"Yes. They've been filing lawsuits and liens against anyone refusing to sell. Tie them up in court on false charges. Force them to expend precious funds on legal fees. Eventually, force them to sell. They had done the same to Mrs. McLeary, nearly exhausted all of her savings they did. But," he smirked, "she won in the courts."

But lost outside them. "So now what do we do?"

"Take them to the bobbers! To justice." He stamped his foot on the table and threatened to overturn my teacup. "This is not right!"

"We can't take Crosley to court. Or Weems for that matter. We have no evidence. And Crosley ..." I knew of Crosley. Everyone did. A high financier with friends in very high places. In the papers frequently as philanthropist and speculator. Beyond reproach he was. But then the tabloids like nothing better than a scandal.

"We have to do something! That dear Mrs. McLeary. And the lass Colleen. A sweet thing she is. You could not do better than with her, getting along as you are."

I winced at his reference to my bachelorhood. It had become an increasingly frequent subject of our conversations. I had been engaged. Once. But the turmoil of my increasingly failing business had driven her to the arms of a more successful man. After three years I was still licking my wounds. "He will come after her, won't he?"

"I saw the paperwork ready to be filed. Another will. Fraudulent I am sure, but sufficient to cause legal difficulties."

I stirred my tea thoughtfully. "I don't suppose you found any records of Weems hiring ...help?"

"Come now, laddie, do you think he would be as foolish as to keep a written receipt or such if he was using hooligans?"

"Never hurts to ask." After a pause I set down my glass. "I guess we'll have to do it ourselves, then."

"Do what?"

"Find the men who murdered poor Mrs. McLeary. But we'll need bait."

He knocked out the ashes from his pipe on a saucer, then studied me. "And what would that be?"

"Me."

O'Toole's Barking Dog was the seventh unsavory establishment I had entered this evening. I had decided that the murderers were probably thugs from the vicinity of dear Mrs. McLeary's residence

as they would be more familiar with the neighborhood, less likely to be overly conspicuous, make a mistake and enter the wrong residence and so forth. I had left Haig at home, much to his dismay. "You are a city boy; you have no idea how to deal with ruffians," he had pointed out angrily.

"And how can you help? I think I need to travel light tonight."

He had no rejoinder for that, so after doing the dinner dishes I took a carriage and made my way to Mrs. McLeary's neighborhood. My approach was the same at every establishment; enter as a loudmouth drunken lout (an act which became increasingly easier as the hours wore on), sit at the bar and rail on to one and all about the injustices of the world and most especially the fate of the late Mrs. McLeary.

* * *

Now I was seated in the Barking Dog and repeating my performance. "I know who did it, sure as the sun rises and the Queen rules the world," I slurred to those around me. "Hired thugs of that thieving Crosley they be. Cowards one and all." This last statement had never failed to earn nods of agreement and a toast condemning the evil rich. This time, however, I noticed several unwholesome characters at a table immediately break into a heated conversation punctuated by occasional glances at me. I quickly ordered another pint and prattled on. "Kind woman she was. Such a pleasant soul, no bad word for anybody. I would love to get these two hands around the throats of the hooligans who did her in."

"She was a saint, that one," a mate several faces down joined it. "When my missus was troubled with the gout, she helped clean our rooms and cook our dinners until the wife was better." Another added a tale of her love for animals, and soon everyone at the bar was weeping joyfully and toasting to the spirit of the dear departed, even though some, I was sure, had never heard of Mrs. McLeary in their lives.

I was feeling warm and smug and was well into my third pint when I felt someone crash heavily into me, followed immediately by curses. "Watch it, laddie. You trying to trip me, play some foolish game now?"

I found myself looking up at one of the rough-looking strangers who had been eyeing me. "I'm sorry," I gurgled.

"Sorry, he says. Tries to knock me off my wickets and says he's sorry?" A large fist suddenly appeared below my nose. "I'll teach you some manners, that I will."

"None of that, now," the barkeep appeared immediately. "I'm sure this gentleman did not mean any harm."

"Any harm?" The man grinned at me while his companion walked to the other side, surrounding me. "He could have broke my leg, that he could. Some loudmouth little yip that can't keep his mouth shut and opinions to himself, that's what he be. Insulting the gentry as he has. Speaking things he knows nothing of. Manners is what he needs."

I felt something sharp press against my side, from where his partner was standing. A knife I was sure. Would they do me in right here? "Again I apologize," I blubbered. "I did not see you. The passing of my friend has been most troubling." I wiped away a tear.

The man was unmoved. "You best stop spreading lies about your betters. If you know what is good for you." Then he nodded to his companion and they stomped out of the pub.

My hand was trembling when I reached for my pint. My plan had succeeded much better and much more rapidly than I had expected. To be honest I hadn't decided what I would do when those I had upset finally came calling. I had never thought they would visit that evening.

But being right was one thing; proving it to those who mattered was something else again. Those

around me soon lost interest and I was able to leisurely finish my pint in peace. When I made my way to the loo I was relieved to find a back door. I used it, just in case my assailants were waiting for me.

They were waiting for me anyway. The silent man grabbed me as soon as I stumbled out into the gas-lit alley and threw me against the wall. He let out a harsh whistle while I tried to catch my breath, then brought a knife up to my throat. "Not a word," he whispered and poked me lightly for emphasis. When he withdrew his blade, a drop of blood was on the tip. Within seconds I heard approaching footsteps, then a grunt of satisfaction as the other hooligan stepped out of the shadows.

"So the mouthy one was trying to leave us," he nodded smugly. "You were so willing to talk back in the pub, now talk to us. What do you know about Mrs. McLeary's death?"

"I don't," I shook my head. "I don't know anything."

He reached forward and patted me on the cheek while his friend held the knife fast near my throat. "That is not what you said inside. And you mentioned our friend Mr. Crosley. Most distressing that is." Suddenly he punched me in the stomach; his companion barely jerked the knife away in time, otherwise I would have slit my own throat when I doubled over. My interrogator grabbed me by the hair and pulled me erect. "Now tell me, what do you know?"

"We know that Crosley hired you to kill the lady so he could purchase her property," a familiar voice called from behind them.

My assailants turned just in time to see a figure burst amongst us. It was about the only time they had. I've never seen anyone move so fast; I was still catching my breath when the carnage was over and both men were lying unconscious. Leaving a smiling Haig to help me to my feet.

"But you're, but you're..." I stared up at him, still in shock from the attack, still reeling from Haig's sudden appearance. "But you're tall!"

"That I am, laddie," he wrapped one arm around me. "We leprechauns can assume your size any time we choose. We're amongst you all the time even though you'd never know. Can you walk? We have to call the bobbies before they come to."

Which we did. They were skeptical of my report, but there were enough witnesses from the pub to convince them to hold my assailants. They became even more curious when a barrister arrived the next day to post bail. The barrister was Weems.

The next two months held a dizzying parade of events. The tabloids began to run stories, first little bits of gossip, then full-fledged articles as both the Crown and public became interested in Mrs. McLeary's murder. The legal actions carried on by Weems and Crosley were matters of public record and soon their targets began telling their stories to all who would listen. And the tabloids made sure many were. My assailants had notorious records of their own, and under severe pressure from prosecutors came forward and admitted to their involvement with Crosley and Weems ...and dear Mrs. McLeary.

I had little time to notice; the publicity had generated intense interest in myself and my Recipe Sweetener, so much so that when Weems made an attempt to foreclose on my mortgage I had sufficient funds to meet my back obligations. Colleen had even visited to thank me. One thing led to another and we found time to enjoy a dinner date, where I learned she was engaged.

But several questions remained and it was only after the dust had settled that I was able to ask them. "You followed me that night," I said as Haig and I were enjoying dessert one evening.

He nodded. He was back to his regular size; except for that single instance, he had remained as how I had always known him. "You have no talent for fisticuffs, Sean. I thought it best."

"I thank you for your help. But why?"

He frowned. "Why what?"

Since learning of his real abilities, I had wanted desperately to ask so many things. Now was the time. "Why are you still here? You could have left anytime. Especially since you can ...be like us."

"Ah, laddie, you think you know what you know not." He emptied his pipe, then sat back and rested his feet on the ashtray. "When your grandfather found me, t'was nothing like you have been told. I met him at a pub and I was pretending to be human. A most delightful companion he was, a witty man, heart of a poet. Many a pint of the brewer's art we put away that night! We were both singing to the angels when we started back across the moors. Which is where I lost control and became ...me.

"Now any other man would have taken advantage, would have seized me and robbed me of my fortune. But your grandfather, ah, he cared not a whit for money. Instead he took me to his home to hide and protect me until I could regain my senses, protect myself. For that kind deed I owed him deeply. In fact, I still do."

I felt a surge of pride at my ancestor's largesse. "Any debt you may have owed has long been paid in full."

"Sean, me boy, please understand. We leprechauns are normally solitary creatures. But I don't like solitude. Your family had taken me in, made me one of their own. I am a Doakes as well as a Haig. As long as I am welcome," he finished softly.

"You're always welcome, Haig," I smiled.

With a cloud of smoke he abruptly changed the subject. "You know, I enjoyed our adventure with Crosley and his gang immensely. We should do that again."

"What? Get attacked in an alley?"

"No, no. I take it you haven't read the mail." I shook my head. "This came by post." He shoved a letter to me with his foot. I skimmed it. It was from someone I didn't know asking if we could investigate a matter of "grave importance."

Which is how Doakes and Haig, Criminal Consultants, was born.

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Author's comments

I believe there are two ways you can use mythology in writing fantasy. One is to accept the premises which have been long established and use them as the bedrock for your story.

The other is to change that mythology to suit your needs and interests. A "mythology" after all is chiefly a fantasy invention that has been around for centuries (more or less). Leprechauns are known for their pot of gold (and that will become an important plot element in a later Doakes/Haig investigation), but they are not reputed to be able to change into human form. But then this is my universe and my leprechaun so basically I can bend the rules to how I see fit. Besides, for me it's more fun. What is the point of writing fantasy if you can't invent something?

Some "purist" readers might object to that, but anyone who has read my other work knows I am far from a purist. I did find it interesting that the editor who accepted "A Small Matter of Murder" confessed in a column that she had vowed never to accept a leprechaun story because she didn't think anything new could be done with the concept. I like to think that I have (but friends say I am delusional in many ways). I trust you will as well.

Author Bio:

Patrick Welch received a B.A. and M.A. in English from Bowling Green State University. Proving the value of a liberal education, he has worked variously as a musician, dock worker, insurance salesman, full-time and substitute teacher, free-lance writer and assistant store manager.

He has published more than forty stories in ezines and the small press. Currently, Patrick also has two other books available from Twilight Times Books, **Cynnador** and **The Thirteenth Magician**.

More information on his writing can be found at his web site:

<http://www.sff.net/people/patrickw/>

Excerpt from **The Thirteenth Magician**
dark fantasy novel

By Patrick Welch

Chapter One

The Seventh Magician

Daasek swirled the gritty wine in his goblet and stared darkly into it. If he divined his future in the dross his expression gave no telling. His had been a hard three days' journey, and he was grateful just to have a roof overhead and a wall behind. He fingered the solitary gold coin in his purse and sighed. It was all the satchel allowed this evening, sufficient for a room, a meal and little else. No wench to keep him company, and not enough to get him drunk. If such were possible.

He was in Ta'Bel, a small port that offered little more than several taverns and brothels. He was here for the same reason he had previously visited Oio, Byrnhea, Phrion and several he would not remember. He was here to kill someone. Who, or why, he did not know. He knew only that the urge had set upon him ten days previous, an urge he could not ignore or control. So he was drawn to Ta'Bel. The answers he needed, or at least was permitted, he prayed would come in time. That was a hope Daasek clung to desperately. Because it was the only hope he had.

It was the silence that attracted him. As in any tavern, there was a constant undertow of conversation, clinking goblets, the coarse laughter of the men and the feigned outrage of the women. Although Daasek took no part in the festivities, it was comforting to observe them. But suddenly nearly everyone stopped. He turned from his glass to discover why.

A tall, very thin man had entered. He was clad in a velvet jerkin and breeches, both the color of blood. The man's skin was gray, more from dust perhaps than a lack of sunlight. Gray and stretched taut across protruding cheekbones and forehead. The urge, sometimes irritating like a stone in a shoe, others a force that struck with fire, squirmed within Daasek as he gazed upon the newcomer's face. There was no doubt. This was the man he was being driven to kill.

The latter approached the bar, where a space was quickly made. He spoke briefly to the innkeeper, who returned immediately with a mug of wine. Daasek noted the man made no effort to pay. Instead he leaned against the bar with an unhappy smile and studied the room.

The stranger's attention was drawn to a game of dice at a far corner, where the participants, concentrating on the action, had ignored his entrance. Daasek had noted it earlier and regretted his forced austerity. Not that he would have won. He was a terrible gambler, but the camaraderie, even paid for, would have been enjoyable. What interested the stranger interested Daasek, so he decided to pay more attention to the game.

Until then, the game had been reasonably friendly, with curses and threats immediately followed by laughter and calls for more wine. Within moments of the stranger's attention the atmosphere changed. One player suddenly began enjoying a phenomenal run of luck. Four times in succession he threw triple fives with the three dice. The first time he was greeted with cheers and congratulations, the second mere wonderment. By the fourth time the competitors were no longer supportive.

Daasek glanced over at the velvet man. His eyes were closed and he was crooning softly to himself. All the while he caressed the solitary black stone within the single ring he wore.

Another winning roll and one loser had had enough. A short, burly man in leather jerkin seized the dice and hurled them against the wall. Three fives came up again. Before the winner could protest, his arms were pinned by two of the gamblers. The short man drew his knife and calmly, expertly slashed the winner's throat. His comrades held the victim until there was no more movement, then they dropped him face down into his growing pool of blood. They divided the victim's purse among themselves, then stalked out of the bar. On the way one glared at Daasek, but Daasek offered no protest.

While the innkeeper and his help hastened to clear away the damage, Daasek returned his attention to the stranger. The stranger was smiling sincerely now, and drinking deeply from his glass. It was clear he had an erection. From the fresh stain on the front of his breeches it appeared that he had also had an orgasm.

Daasek understood what had happened. The man, clearly a magician, had controlled the dice - not the victim. Other patrons suspected the same, but no one would challenge him. Except himself, and the time was not right. He would know when that time was. The urge, and his dreams, would assure that.

Unbidden, a goblet of wine was set before him. He looked up, startled. The man in velvet was standing next to him. "I do not wish to stand," he said in a sandy voice. "The wine is payment for sharing your table."

Daasek nodded and pushed a chair forward with his foot.

The man sat with some difficulty, as if physical movement was foreign. There was a dusky odor about him, but one due to time, not carelessness. "I must apologize for my people. As a stranger here, I would not want you to get the wrong impression about the hospitality of Ta'Bel."

Daasek shrugged. "A man who cheats at dice deserves such rewards."

"A harsh code of behavior you proffer. One, I gather, you have learned in the wilderness?"

"Many places."

"Tell me."

Daasek stared at him through half-closed eyes. The closeness of the man made his nerves quiver. He had been this close to magicians before. How many times he knew not, but he suspected the result. "The glass of wine bought you a seat. Nothing more."

"On the contrary. It bought me your life." The man finished his glass, then stared at Daasek. "You are fortunate. I'm going to give you a choice. With most men, believe me, my offer is not as generous. The soldiers will be here soon. If you remain, you will be blamed for the murder. Everyone here saw you switch the dice with your partner, clumsy fool. Or you can come with me and share my hospitality."

Daasek sipped the wine slowly. It tasted much better than the vintage he had been enduring. It was unfortunate he could not enjoy the physical benefits of alcohol as well. But he had ceased wondering why he was impervious to poisons, including the most benign. He had ceased wondering about most of his life, because the answers never came. It was the urge that mattered now, and the urge was to kill this man. "A most convincing argument," he replied. "Please lead the way."

"You will find this superior to the sewage we were accosted with at that inn." His host handed Daasek a silver goblet filled with amber liquid. Daasek had finished his bath - the magician had insisted upon it and Daasek saw no reason to refuse - and was now clad in the same red velvet as his host. This room, as the others he had seen, featured red curtains and carpet, furnishings of exotic woods, objects d'art of marble and gold. Yet there was no sense of comfort or hospitality, and the fireplace offered light, not warmth. Daasek made himself as comfortable as the tight clothing would allow and waited for the man to continue.

The man lit a silver pipe, exhaled extravagantly. "Travelers are either seeking or fleeing. Which are you, whoever you are?"

"You are my host, not my brother. Information should be shared, not demanded."

"Please do not tire me. If you did not know who I was, you would not be here to kill me."

The cool of the wine did not quell the fire in Daasek's heart. "I was not aware I wanted to kill you," he lied.

The man fondled the ring he wore. In the light Daasek noted the single black stone in a silver setting inlaid with arcane symbols. The stone was familiar. It had something to do with the power of the magicians. He knew not why, but he would have to destroy the stone as well as the magician.

"Perhaps you are right. My name is Krujj. Now you shall tell me yours."

"Daasek."

"Your birthplace."

"I must claim ignorance."

"Of your birthright?"

"Yes." Daasek casually let his hand fall to his side. His dagger nestled snugly in the too-tight jerkin. It could be in his hand at the speed of a thought. Meanwhile the urge throbbed, but it was not yet overwhelming. He could parley with the magician if that was what the latter wanted. And enjoy the wine. There was plenty of time to kill him. So Daasek pondered the question, and decided to respond further. "There are areas in my past that are lost to me. If I am truly seeking something, then that is my goal. If you can help me, then, yes, you are the one I seek."

Krujj laughed. "Yes, I can help you. If I care to. You look like a barbarian, fresh from the wastelands of the west. Yet you lack their poor manners or tongue. Noble breeding must lurk in your background."

"A pleasant thought if true. Perhaps I am claimant to a usurper's throne. Or heir to a merchant's fortune." Even as he said it casually, Daasek wondered, hoped that perhaps it was true. "If that is the case, I will reward you handsomely for your assistance."

"Give assistance?" he roared. "I give nothing! From you I will only take...everything."

"Such as that unfortunate's life in the tavern?"

Krujj gestured grandly. "Amusing, was it not? It was for your benefit, of course. And his."

"His?" Daasek started. The conversation was taking a direction he had not anticipated, but one he wanted to follow.

Krujj laughed cruelly. "I pity you, Daasek. Truly. You have no life, you have nothing. You can only do what you are told. Tell me, where were you last?"

"Panot."

"Previous?"

"BaniFel."

"Two lies. Before that?"

"I don't know." This time he told the truth.

Krujj nodded. "You shouldn't try to mislead me, Daasek. You can't deceive a man with my talents. Not here."

"If you think you can control me as easily as a set of dice, you are mistaken."

"That is true. You I cannot control. Because you are already controlled. But I control everything and everyone in Ta'Bel. That is why you shall fail."

Daasek poured himself more wine. He couldn't be poisoned, he couldn't become inebriated. One of the boons of being controlled, he was sure Krujj would say. The mage was right, terrifyingly so. Of that he was sure. If he could learn more, perhaps he could escape, perhaps he could regain possession of himself. If the magician would tell him. He had to prolong the conversation, at least until the urge became overwhelming. Already he felt it rising inside him like bile, ready to spew forth. He took a deep breath to regain some control. "If you are so secure, why did you seek me out? Why bring me here to tell me this?"

Krujj took a seat closer to the fire. He fed the flames for a moment, his regal manner gone. "My master told me you would come. My spies informed me of your arrival. I could have had them kill you instantly, but I doubt it would have accomplished much, not that way." When he turned to Daasek, the regal mien was gone, replaced by one approaching civility. "You see, I cannot divine the future, Daasek. I have paid enough for what power I have. I will not pay more. If I kill you, he will send someone else. If I can convince him, through you, that I cannot be harmed and I will not harm him, perhaps he will leave me in peace."

"And if I kill you?"

He glared at Daasek, all humanity gone from his face. "You are beginning to tire me. But I will tell you this. There are spheres of power that control this world, spheres of power in conflict with one another. Each of these spheres or gods or demons - whichever you can comprehend - has agents in this world. Each has tools as well. I am an agent. You are a tool." His voice darkened. "It is much easier to destroy a tool, Daasek, than an agent."

"Why do you tell me this, if I am in truth a helpless, hopeless pawn?" He dropped his hand near his dagger once again.

The magician flicked his hand as if a gnat had bothered him. "For now that is true. But the time may come when you can free yourself. The odds are against it, but dear Karmela has smiled upon you much longer than any could have anticipated. If that happens, I wish you to remember everything he has done to you, everything he has made you do. I believe you will feel very strongly about revenge."

"Since you know, tell me who he is and where I can find him."

"It matters not presently. Frankly, I doubt you will have the opportunity." He yawned exaggeratedly. "If you'll excuse me, I'm rather tired. I hope you realize it is not my lack of hospitality, but my common sense that makes me bid you leave. I have made arrangements for your transportation." He looked at Daasek coldly. "You will not return to Ta'Bel."

Daasek suddenly found himself rising to his feet. He tried to reach his dagger, but he could not move his arms even the few inches necessary. Instead they were caught in a steel grip from his shoulders to his hands, and for all his strength he could not control them.

He tried to trip over a chair, walk into a wall, but his feet marched unbidden. But Krujj can't control me, he thought as he was walked towards the door, then outside and into the night-covered street. He said so.

It was only when he was in the cool evening air and sitting on the back of a galloping mount, that he finally understood. It was not his body Krujj controlled, but the clothing Daasek had been maneuvered into wearing.

* * *

Daasek's flight into the night was a dream born in Hys. He had no control over his body, his mount, his destination. The entire journey was at full gait down winding stone streets, over tree-lined roads and rock-strewn paths. Limbs slashed across his face, his horse nearly fell a dozen times, yet he could only sit straight and rock still in the saddle and curse Krujj.

Near dawn the ride ended abruptly. The tension of the velvet disappeared without warning and Daasek almost fell before grabbing hold of the reins. Then his mount collapsed below him. As he picked himself off the ground, he finally realized how his steed had maintained the rapid pace for so long. Daasek had been riding a corpse.

He slept in the open until sunrise. It was only after wakening, when he attempted to bathe the dried blood and dirt and pain away, that he understood the full horror of Krujj's plans. For he could not remove the clothing at all. And it was slowly beginning to compress.

Daasek caught and cooked a rabbit for lunch and planned. He must get the clothing removed. Somehow. He must get back to Ta'Bel. Somehow. He must slay Krujj. Somehow. When he awoke from a brief nap, he knew the answers. Somehow.

* * *

"I don't think I can do it."

"I've paid you sufficiently, have I not?"

"You may die."

"I will die if you don't. Every day they grow tighter. They will soon crush my very breath from me."

The healer looked at the array of knives, potions, and amulets at his disposal. None seemed adequate. "Some I can cut, some I will have to burn. Are you sure you cannot take my herbs?"

"They have no effect on me. You have tied me securely?"

"Yes." Daasek was suspended from two beams. His hands, ankles and head were fastened by leather straps and metal chains. Once the pain began, neither knew if they would hold him immobile. Or for how long. Only his head was uncovered.

"You may begin," said Daasek.

The healer put a strap in his patient's mouth to cover his screams, taking care to compress the tongue so it could not be bitten through. Then he turned to the table where his instruments lay. He sharpened and heated his knives while he studied his patient. Magician's work, to be sure. A man as muscular as Daasek should be able to burst through the velvet just through his own strength. He hoped the man was indeed as strong as he appeared. He would need it all if he were to recover.

He approached and rubbed his hand along one of Daasek's arms. The cloth was stretched so taut that he could actually feel the pulse beneath. His patient was speaking truly. The man would die if he could not be freed. He took a deep breath and slowly slit across the clothing. It parted reluctantly, and blood quickly filled the gap. He pulled at the cloth. It peeled back slowly, as if it were part of Daasek, and took hair and skin with it. The doctor looked up and saw his patient gazing fixedly at him. There was pain in the eyes, but something else as well. He turned his gaze quickly. "Wait." He placed a blindfold over his patient. "You needn't see this." And I dare not look again at those eyes, he added mentally.

* * *

During brief periods of consciousness, Daasek remembered the powerful and evil man in blue who had come from a dying forest in another land. Who had imprisoned his village, then captured him unawares. Who had stolen his soul. An old, evil man who commanded him by dreams and other powers to slay for unknown reasons. A man who's name Daasek was not allowed to remember.

In those moments he vowed revenge on Krujj, on his master, most of all on the beings who watched from somewhere and laughed. But when Daasek awoke two weeks later, after his body had become a mass of bandages and blood, he recalled nothing.

* * *

"It will require a year."

"Six months."

The healer shook his head. His patient lay before him, covered in poultices and magic herbs and a few well-placed leeches. Daasek's face, hands and feet remained unscathed. The rest of him would become scar tissue. If he survived. "A year. You need at least that long to heal."

"Six months. Krujj must not forget. I want to see fear in his eyes when he recognizes me."

"You will never stand the pain."

Daasek laughed. "Yes I will. You've given me plenty of practice."

* * *

The bearded man ignored the stares and whispers of the townspeople. They in turn couldn't ignore the squat barbarian whose half-naked body was so pitifully, totally scarred. Even the innkeeper, accustomed to strangers from many climes, caught his breath when the man approached. "I desire a room."

After a long insulting silence, the man nodded. "Three gold crous for the night."

"Your rates have gone up."

The innkeeper looked at him thoughtfully. He could not forget a man like this. "You have never been here," he stated after a pause.

"Perhaps. That will do. One night." Coins were exchanged.

The man checked them carefully, then nodded. "Up the stairs, take..."

"No, something on the ground floor."

"Only slaves live there."

"Let one stay in my room. I paid for it."

The innkeeper acquiesced. It would be better for his guests' dispositions if the stranger was kept from them anyway. He gestured at a wrinkled bent man. "Follow him," he said after a whispered conversation with his property.

Daasek was led down a narrow hallway to an equally narrow room. Light from a small window revealed a tiny pile of filthy straw, nothing else. He ushered the slave from the room and quickly shut the door.

Daasek had noted during his first visit to Ta'Bel that inns lacked windows beyond the first floor, presumably to discourage early exits. The stench of the room didn't trouble him because he had no intention of remaining. Instead he removed his false beard and donned more revealing clothing. Soldiers broke into the room less than ten minutes later, but by then he had fled.

* * *

"You want it this dark?"

"Please."

The whore shrugged and closed the shutters. He had been very quiet, this man, almost shy perhaps, but richly dressed. He had needed little persuasion to accompany her. Now she had doubts. But he had paid without debate and in advance. "Do you want any help?" she asked coyly and reached for him.

"No," and she was startled by his intensity. "I want you to wear this." He handed her a strip of cloth.

She forced a laugh. "Where?"

"Across your eyes. I don't want you to see me."

She pondered. A rich merchant or traveling royalty, fearing reprisal from this peccadillo? Or someone with darker intent? But he had paid well, and she had help—and eyes—in the tavern next to her. And a sharp knife she always kept nearby. She had used both in the past.

He noted her hesitancy. "I am not going to hurt you. It's just that...I had an accident. I am afraid you will not find me attractive."

"I'm sure that won't happen," she smiled invitingly and reached for him again. But he quickly pulled away. Prolonging the inevitable would just prevent her from earning more that day, she decided. So she put on the blindfold and settled on the bed.

He was on her in seeming seconds, hungry and scared and naive and caring all at once, and she forgot her concern in the mad union of their bodies. It was only after his orgasm that she realized he was crying.

* * *

There were no moons that evening, which suited Daasek. The sport with the whore had been an enjoyable way to spend the afternoon, but more importantly, it had kept him hidden from Krujj's spies. Now he stood outside the magician's home and fingered the hilt of his sword. Surely Krujj knew he was here, or at least some enemy was. The only question was how he would attack.

Daasek found the answer when he turned into the alley. He was studying the balustrade, judging the height, when he heard footsteps. He turned and saw three armed men appear at the passage.

"The coward sends slaves this time," Daasek laughed. "Which one of you wishes to die first?"

They made no answer. The alley was narrow, only two could enter at once. Daasek noted carefully the one who held back. He would be the better fighter, Daasek decided. The other two advanced. He pulled his dagger almost carelessly from its sheath and casually flicked it underhand at the stocky man on his right.

It was a casual flip, but deadly accurate. The blade was not of metal, and thinner, stronger - and sharper - than any forged by man. The attacker gasped, then collapsed unmoving as the weapon buried itself into his chest.

The second man didn't hesitate, yet the third continued to hold back. Daasek was faintly surprised as he parried the first blow. Caution, cowardice, or a sense of honor? He wondered. He leaped as the blade flashed towards his knees, then brought his own flat on the man's left arm. The man grunted and spun back.

Daasek only smiled. "I could have taken your arm," he said reasonably. "Is Krujj paying you enough to die?"

The man swore and lunged again, forcing Daasek back further into the alley. It was no cleaner than any city street, and garbage underfoot threatened his balance. He ducked as a thrust went over his head and into the wall, then brought his sword up hilt-first into the man's stomach. The man doubled over and almost dropped his weapon. Daasek grabbed him by the hair and drove his face into the wall once, twice, three times. When he let go, the man dropped to the alley, dark red blood streaming from his mouth and ears.

Daasek turned to the final man and saluted. "Now we can enjoy ourselves."

The latter made a mocking bow and drew his own blade. "Thank you. Now I won't have to share my reward for slaying you."

"You will earn no reward this evening."

"On the contrary. I will earn two. Money for me and your soul for Hys. I admit you fought my fellows well. But I am much better than they were. Besides," he added as he feinted, "you're too ugly to live."

Even as Daasek moved to block, the blade flicked as fast as a fly down and away, and a ribbon of red suddenly appeared on his side.

"I have plenty of time," the man continued as he moved his sword in ever tightening circles. "I was ordered to make your death painful. And I do what I'm told."

Daasek sidled away as the blade flashed towards him again. He was no match for the latter's skill, and, unfortunately, they both knew it. He cursed as he stumbled and the sword slid across his right arm. If only he still had his dagger.

But his knife was in a dead man at the far end of the alley and his opponent wasn't letting him by. Instead he pressed forward, forcing Daasek towards the far wall. If swords wouldn't do, there had to be something else, Daasek decided.

He needed the opportunity. As long as the man thrust straight or at his legs, he was nearly helpless. He was already bleeding from a dozen new cuts and slashes, and if he let the battle continue, he would

be unable to face Krujj even if he survived. It had to end soon.

The other man smiled as Daasek gasped for breath. "You will get your rest soon enough. The eternal rest of the damned." He swung at Daasek's head.

It was what Daasek had waited for. He deflected the blow slightly, then dropped his own sword. With both hands he grabbed the other's arm. The man shrieked as Daasek turned back his wrist, shattering it within seconds. Daasek retrieved the weapon while the last attacker lay nearly in shock in the alley. He approached the man slowly. "Krujj will be disappointed in you."

"Even if you kill me," the man taunted between clenched teeth, "it only prolongs the inevitable. You will soon join me."

Daasek shrugged. "Perhaps, but I still outlived you," He buried the sword in his foeman's heart.

He extracted his dagger, then wiped both blades clean. Krujj would be curious now, he knew. Krujj would want to face him.

He leapt and grabbed the ornate balustrade. He felt muscle and skin tear, and blood appeared from a hundred new wounds. The first rush of fire nearly caused him to scream, but he remained silent as he hoisted himself to the small porch above. He would have time to recover later. Right now Krujj was waiting.

He broke the window with his sword, then walked inside. From the single candle resting on a small table he could see he was in a library. "Down the hall and to your left," a strange voice called out softly. Daasek looked. On the far wall a stag's head stared down sightlessly at him. Its dead eyes glowed.

"Thank you," he bowed.

"Down the hall and to your left," the stag continued. Daasek went down the hall and to his left.

* * *

He recalled the room instantly. The mage was standing next to the fireplace, goblet in hand, just as he had so many months before. He smiled as Daasek entered, sword at ready. "The door was open. The window was unnecessary."

"So were your guards. I hope they left no widows."

"Meaningless lives. Just as meaningless as yours."

"Perhaps you can still give meaning to mine. As you suggested once before."

A frown touched the gray man briefly. "The last time?"

"This may help." Daasek reached inside his belt and threw a shred of red velvet to Krujj. "I regret your suit is much the worse for wear."

Krujj examined the cloth and the bits of skin and hair adhering to it. Then he laughed. "You did survive. My compliments. I apologize for not recognizing you earlier, but your appearance has changed much since we last met. I do prefer you this way."

Daasek forced his voice to remain even. "You have information I need. Give it to me now."

Krujj drank deeply. "I told you before, barbarian. You have everything you need to know within you. I cannot make it reappear. I will only make it unnecessary."

"I ask only once."

"And I say this," Krujj responded and hurled his goblet.

Daasek ducked easily, but the magician's real attack came from below. The rug at his feet suddenly surged, and he was swept off-balance. It was then he realized why everything in the room seemed made of red velvet. Every piece of cloth was under Krujj's control.

Krujj remained at the fireside, rubbing his ring and crooning softly. Curtains flailed out at Daasek, striking him across the face and wrapping around his sword. He tried to hold it with both hands, but they were wrapped too tightly as they easily ripped the weapon from him. He reached down and pulled

out his dagger just as another curtain launched itself at him. It encircled his chest like a constrictor and Daasek remembered horribly the suit of velvet that had so dearly cost him as it began to tighten.

He had only one chance now. Fortunately his right arm, his throwing arm, was still free. He allowed himself to fall so he would not be distracted by the bucking carpet. Krujj stood still, eyes closed as he worked his magic. Daasek would get only one chance. Without reason, without question, he knew what his target must be.

He had always been good with a dagger. The weapon caught Krujj in the right hand, the unringed hand, pinning it to the wall. Krujj roared in pain and instantly the curtains ceased their pressure.

Daasek fought out of the velvet cocoon in seconds. The magician was stunned and struggling to free the knife deeply embedded into the wall when Daasek reached him. Without thought, Daasek seized the man's free hand. There was only one object he needed. He nearly broke the magician's finger off as he ripped the arcane ring free. He stepped back. "Now we can talk."

Greenish ochre streamed from Krujj's wound but he ignored it. Instead he focused on the ring Daasek brandished before him. "You must give it to me. You don't understand."

"This?" He held the ring lightly. "Tell me what you know."

The magician clenched his teeth. He tried to pull his hand free but the knife was embedded too firmly and he could not hold the haft with his other. "It will do you no good. I need my ring!"

"You were such a gracious host, I can only repay in kind." He approached and with a swift pull removed his dagger from the wall and the magician. The man dropped to his knees, cradling his wounded hand. "You want this ring? Then take it," and he turned and threw it into the fire.

"No!" The magician lunged after it. He stuck in his hands, shrieked, pulled them back, stuck them in again. Flames shot up his arm and quickly engulfed him.

Now that the ring and stone had been destroyed by the fire, one final task remained. Daasek retrieved his sword and approached slowly. He brought his weapon down, decapitating Krujj.

But as he did so Krujj reached out and grabbed his left arm. Daasek yelped at the burning touch and quickly shook himself free. He stepped back. The carpet was already beginning to burn. The rest of the house would soon follow. As he left he looked at his left arm. The burns from Krujj's touch left an oddly familiar design on his scarred skin. But, as usual, just a flash of recognition was all he was permitted.

* * *

He spent the evening in a tavern by the bay. From the doorway he could see the lights of the flames engulfing the magician's home. But he didn't feel avenged, or satisfied, or even relieved. As he drank his wine he could already feel the emptiness changing to the cursed urge, the urge to travel and to kill. He was sure that by morning it would be full upon him. And he could only obey.

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Author's comments

I would like to say the idea for **The Thirteenth Magician** came in a dream, like Robert Louis Stevenson, or that I wrote it in a fit of fiery passion, like Herman Melville. Neither is close to the truth.

I came up with the story when I was still getting my degree at Bowling Green State University, even writing an earlier version of the first chapter. But I did nothing more with it for nearly twenty years while I concentrated on music and trying to make a living as an advertising writer. When I did finally decide to write it, I spent about six months doing the first draft and another eight years trying to sell it.

Which is why I see real validity in e-publishing, especially for beginning writers. From what I have heard in workshops and such, publishers won't even look at a novel less than 80,000 words, and this one is about 60,000. I could have padded it I suppose, but I don't think that would have been fair to the reader. Furthermore, as my agent at the time lamented, publishers seem to want something different...until they get it. Then they change their mind.

I approached writing the book much the same way I approach writing short fiction. I don't plot out every detail beforehand, write detailed backgrounds of the characters and so forth. I know where I'm starting and know where I'm going, but I have no idea how to get from point A to Z. This, for me, is where the fun and discovery of writing occurs. This is where the characters start dictating what they can do and say, where plot twists and surprises arise. It's probably more time-consuming to approach writing this way, but for me it's much more enjoyable....

Peace.

Patrick Welch

Author bio:

Patrick Welch received a B.A. and M.A. in English from Bowling Green State University. Proving the value of a liberal education, he has worked variously as a musician, dock worker, insurance salesman, full-time and substitute teacher, free-lance writer and assistant store manager.

He has published more than forty stories in ezines and the small press. Currently, Patrick also has two other books available from Twilight Times Books, **Cynnador** and **The Thirteenth Magician**.

More information on his writing can be found at his web site:

<http://www.sff.net/people/patrickw/>

Jerome and the Seraph
literary fantasy

By Robina Williams

Jerome and the Seraph

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Prologue

Pan still plays to those who will hear him

“Whoops!” Brother Jerome clutched at the headstone on Father Aloysius’s grave in an attempt to steady himself on the icy ground, but on the frozen grass his feet slid from beneath him. He pitched forward, his head hit the headstone with a thud and he slumped down, blood trickling from the cut on his temple.

His fellow friars gave him a good send-off. The Provincial traveled up for the funeral, and Jerome was interred in the same grave as Aloysius.

Despite his annoyance at his untimely death, Jerome had to smile at the irony of it all: being laid to rest in the same grave that had killed him, with his name and dates engraved on the headstone on which he had banged his head, well, that capped it all. He wondered if Someone had a rather black sense of humor.

His death came as a complete surprise to him. So did the afterworld. There were no cherubs, no harps, no fluffy white clouds. There wasn’t anything, really. There wasn’t even anyone to talk to, although Aloysius popped along once, briefly, apologetically.

“Sorry about that, Jerry,” he said.

Jerome grasped the old priest’s hand, noting with interest how solid it felt. “That’s all right, Al. These things happen.” After all, he could hardly blame Aloysius for his death — not really. To be sure, if Aloysius’s grave hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have cracked his head on it. But then, if he’d had an ounce of common sense, he wouldn’t have gone out on an icy day in a pair of old sandals with slippery soles.

He said all this to Aloysius. But he could see that Aloysius still felt guilty: as he stood contritely before him, his kindly old face was flushed with embarrassment.

It was one thing, Aloysius said, to die as he had done, in the fullness of time, at the end of a long life, with the rest of the chaps gathered in prayer around his bed, saying a few last words to him and giving him the final blessing. It was quite another to die as Jerome had done. Jerome had been no age at all. He hadn’t expected death: he’d had no time to prepare for it. Fit as a fiddle one minute, he’d been a corpse the next.

Jerome told him not to worry, not to blame himself. It had been an unfortunate accident. One of them had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sure, if Al’s grave hadn’t been where it was, then he’d still be back at the friary. Alive... with a broken leg maybe, but alive. But never mind: accidents happen.

Aloysius was still upset, though. He patted Jerome’s arm comfortingly, murmured sympathetically and disappeared.

Jerome hoped Aloysius would show up again, but he didn’t reappear, and he wondered where the old man had gone. He looked around but couldn’t see him anywhere. He prayed he wouldn’t be on his own forever; he liked a bit of company. He found it boring, being alone. He tried meditating to pass the time but soon gave it up. He had never been much good at it: his thoughts kept wandering off. Now they meandered back to the friary, and Jerome found himself reflecting once more on the irony of his situation.

It wasn’t the manner of his death that piqued him, but the fact that he was dead when others at the friary who were much, much older were still alive. It was quite annoying to have been outlived by the

seriously old. He had been outlived by Father Angus, for instance. Angus was well into his nineties, and claimed to be looking forward to death. Each morning at breakfast, he would say without fail, "Well, one day nearer home."

Jerome smiled as he pictured the old friar, with his untidy beard and watery eyes. He remembered Father Peter had nicknamed him Angus Dei. Their guardian had told him he ought to do penance for making a joke like that. Well, Angus still wasn't home, but Jerome was, and he wasn't enjoying it much.

You spend most of your life looking forward to the next world, he thought, but when you get there, it's a bit of a let-down. There isn't much to be said for it at all. It's rather disappointing.

He had expected something more... positive, something in the way of an experience. He hadn't thought it would be like this. He'd been expecting... well, he didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it hadn't been this. *Is this all there is?* he wondered.

As he was reflecting on how uneventful the afterlife was turning out to be, he remembered Charles Causley's poem *Eden Rock* and wished he, too, could be invited over to the picnic with the blue tin cups, the sauce bottle and the little dog. That would be a real treat — not that he particularly liked dogs himself: he preferred cats, he always had done.

There was something about cats. Maybe it was the cool way they looked at you, as if weighing you up, appraising you, trying to decide whether you were worthy of them, worthy of their affection. You had to deserve cats. Sure, they'd take food from you when they were hungry — what animal wouldn't? But they wouldn't necessarily like you for having fed them. If they did like you, you had the feeling it was quite an honor for you.

That made him think of Leo, the ginger tomcat who lived at the friary. They'd always gotten along well. Leo had already been in residence when Jerome arrived, though no one could remember the cat's arrival. No one knew where he'd come from. Jerome supposed that he must have turned up one day, found he liked the place and stayed on, fitting in so well that soon no one could remember a time when he hadn't been around.

Father Angus, who had been at the friary for many years, had thought it a bit odd. Seeing the cat emerging from the shadows in the cloisters one day, he had suggested to Jerome that they had probably had a series of ginger toms and that no one had noticed one taking over from another. After Jerome had said that he thought that idea even odder, they'd concluded that their cat had lived for an unusually long time.

Now that his own life at the friary was over, Jerome was to find out that Leo had indeed lived for a long time — a very, very long time. He was also to find out the cat's real name.

He was to find out that it was Quantum.

Chapter One

Jerome was scarcely able to believe his eyes when he saw the cat padding towards him. Choked with emotion, he bent down to stroke the creature as it nuzzled the hem of his habit, just as it had done back at the friary.

Finally he managed to say, "Hello, Leo, old chap! It's great to see you again!" As the cat meowed a friendly greeting, he added sympathetically, "And what brought you here? Did you have an accident, like me?"

Expecting no answer beyond a further nudge and another meow, he nearly fell over when the cat replied indignantly, "No, of course not. Accidents like that don't happen to me!"

While Jerome struggled to recover from the shock of hearing the cat speak, Leo added, "And the name's Quantum, by the way, not Leo. You can call me Quant, if you like."

"Of course I can talk," he said in response to Jerome's next question.

"But you didn't talk on earth," Jerome pointed out.

Quant did not reply.

Jerome regretted his remark, for he felt that it showed insensitivity to draw attention to the fact that the cat was now as dead as he.

"Can all cats talk?" he asked Quant, adding carefully, "When they're here, I mean?"

The cat considered his question before answering, "All the cats here can talk."

"And the other animals, too?"

Again there was a slight pause before Quant replied, "Yes, the animals here can talk."

Jerome thought back to their first meeting, when Brother Bernard, who helped out in the kitchen, had introduced them. They had hit it off immediately and had taken many companionable strolls together on fine days.

As the cook, and with Bernard's quiet encouragement, Jerome had ensured that Leo was fed the friary scraps. This, unfortunately, was in the teeth of opposition from the guardian, Father Fidelis, who said he saw no reason why the cat shouldn't feed itself off rats and mice in the outbuildings. As a result, Jerome's relationship with the cat had been a friendly one, while his guardian, aiming a sly kick at the animal one morning when he'd thought no one was looking, had received a nasty scratch on his ankle.

One hot summer's afternoon, Father Valentine, who had been an artist before joining the Order, had pointed out how apt the cat's name was. Spotting Jerome sitting in the garden with the animal lying at his feet, he had compared the scene with Dürer's painting of St Jerome in the wilderness with his lion: two Jeromes, both wearing robes, each with a ginger cat lying beside him. Admittedly the desert cat was bigger than their little Leo, but the friary garden was definitely something of a wilderness, too. Everyone had laughed at the comparison, including Jerome when they'd told him about it. They had all agreed that Leo was exactly the right name for the cat, for in the twilight his ginger fur softened to a tawny hue, and he certainly wasn't a cat to be messed with.

Now, Jerome told the cat this little story, thinking that the creature would be amused. Quant, however, looked at him in the strangest way. He said nothing; he just looked.

Jerome had an uneasy feeling. A weird, fantastical thought sprang into his mind. *The cat has been around for an awfully long time. But surely not! It can't be possible....*

And yet, as Jerome looked into the cat's eyes, they seemed to grow bigger and brighter. And suddenly Jerome was no longer looking into the green, familiar, friendly eyes of the cat he knew. Great,

golden eyes gleamed at him: eyes he hadn't seen before, eyes that frightened him. He tried to look away but found he couldn't. The baleful stare held him mesmerized.

The moment passed, and he found himself looking once more into the steady gaze of a small ginger tom. Then before he had time to recover himself, the animal's expression softened and Quant did a parody of the Cheshire Cat and disappeared, leaving Jerome with the memory of an enigmatic, mocking, feline smile.

After that, Quant was away for a while. In his absence, Jerome found that he couldn't get those glittering, feral eyes out of his mind. He asked himself what Quant's past could have been. And he knew the answer as a vision of desert sands rolled out before him.

Quant had been the lion in the picture. He must have been. He had been the lion at the saint's side, his namesake's companion. That was what Quant's past had been.

Then, remembering how the leonine eyes had changed back into the cat's eyes he knew so well, Jerome corrected himself. No, not past, not in Quant's case. Present. What Quant had been, he still was. His past wasn't over and done with. It could be revisited at will. There was no *then* for the cat: there was just *now*.

Jerome sat down and tried calmly, carefully, to think this through. *If Quant's past and present are one, as they seem to be, then time means something different to him. Time is something he can move around in as he pleases — not like the road I was on. When I ran out of road, I ran out of life. Quant's time isn't like that. He's still on the road, still in time. And he can go wherever he likes — backwards, forwards, sideways. Will Quant's time ever end?*

Even as Jerome asked himself the question, a further thought sprang into his mind. *If Quant is still on the road of time, he can't be dead. So what's he doing here? When he is here, that is. And when he isn't here, where is he? Is there a special place in the afterworld where cats spend most of their time?*

Jerome longed for Quant's return so that he could ask him. He was therefore delighted when he saw the creature padding towards him once again.

He went eagerly to meet him, and as he bent to stroke him asked, "Where have you been?"

"Have you been missing me, then?" The cat nuzzled the hem of his habit.

"Of course I have!" Jerome ran his hand along the smooth back. "Where have you been?"

"I've been in the friary, of course."

As he heard the answer, Jerome wondered why he hadn't worked it out for himself. *Of course Quant was in the friary! That's where he lives. Lives, present tense. Quant nips back and forth as he chooses. The enormity of the idea swept over him like a tide.*

"Do you want to come back with me?" the cat asked. "Only you'll have to be quick, if you do."

"Me? Go back with you? To the friary?"

"Why not?"

"But I don't know how to go back."

"I'll show you."

"I really can go back?" Jerome asked incredulously.

"Sure thing. If you want to, that is."

"Of course I do. Er, why now?"

"It's Father Angus's funeral today. I thought you might like to go."

"Old Angus, dead?" Jerome asked.

"Hope so," the cat said. "He's about to be buried. Well, are you coming or not? They're already in the church."

Jerome took a deep breath. "Okay. What do I do?"

"Think gates."

"Gates? What sort of gate?"

"Any sort of gate. The gate you want to come out of."

"You mean we go through a gate?"

"Yup. You open a gate and go through it."

"So I'm to think of a gate? A gate at the friary?"

"Try the church," the cat said. "That's where we're going."

"But there aren't any gates in the church," Jerome objected.

"There don't need to be. There don't need to be actual gates. You make your own gate. Where do you want to come out?"

As Jerome still looked confused, the cat said, "Do you remember the big pillar at the back of the church?"

"The one by the font?"

"That's it," Quant said. "Think of that. Concentrate on it."

Jerome was staring fixedly ahead of him. "I think I've got it."

"Okay," said the cat. "Now, picture a gate in the pillar. Any kind of gate... a simple gate. And keep it in your mind. Look at it. Look hard at it. Don't let it go. Keep looking."

"I'm looking," Jerome said. "I can see the gate. Um, how do we get through it? I mean, how do we open it?"

"That's where the looking comes in."

"How can looking open a gate?" Jerome asked, frowning with the effort of concentration.

"Looking at something alters it. Looking moves particles around."

"Shoves them to one side, you mean? Makes a gateway in them?"

"Something like that," the cat said. "In simple terms, yes. Keep your mind fixed on the pillar now. Don't lose it."

"I'm looking at the pillar. I'm looking at the gate in the pillar." Jerome stared ahead intently.

"Good!" Quant said as he stepped forward. "Now follow me."

Jerome followed him hurriedly.

"Are you still thinking gates?" he heard the cat say before he disappeared.

Jerome didn't answer, for suddenly the atmosphere thinned, his ears popped, he had an impression of cold stone rushing past, and he found himself standing in front of the pillar beside the font at the back of the friary church.

Jerome gasped with shock and, forgetting he had no substance, stretched out a hand to the font to steady himself. Ahead of him the nave of the church was filled with friars and parishioners, and directly in front of him lay Father Angus's coffin on its trolley, with a crucifix and a simple wreath in the form of a cross laid on it.

He felt something rub up against the hem of his habit. He glanced down to find Quant looking at him reassuringly. Jerome was glad the cat was still with him. He didn't feel he could cope without him. He felt as if his heart was about to beat its way out of his chest, wondered briefly about this and realized it was probably impossible, and managed to calm himself with a few deep breaths.

When he felt more settled, he looked around and saw Aloysius standing by the door, watching him. Aloysius waved and Jerome shakily waved back. Wondering who else might be among the congregation, he turned to look down the body of the nave. Seated in the pews among the parishioners there seemed to be an unusually large number of friars. Jerome tried to make out who they were, but most had their hoods pulled up.

As he stared curiously at them, Quant, as if reading his mind, nudged him and padded silently towards a side aisle. Jerome obediently followed, having a nasty feeling as he did that he might be

gliding. One or two of the parishioners noticed the cat, smiled and drew their neighbor's attention to the animal. Jerome noticed that, although he was close behind the cat, no one seemed to see him. It was as if he wasn't there. *Well, I'm not here, am I? Not really, I mean.*

He reached out experimentally to the hymn-books piled on the side table and saw his hand pass through them. Shaken, he followed the cat past rows of pews, towards the chapel. As he passed, some of the robed figures turned to glance at him. He was shocked to find that several of them were friars whose own funerals he had attended. Indeed, he had last seen his old friends lying pale and cold as marble on their deathbed; he had sat with them, keeping them company for a while, praying over their lifeless bodies and remembering times past. Now those same friars nodded to him in recognition. Though bewildered, he greeted them as he moved along. One or two faces — heavily bearded, in the old style — that turned briefly towards him he didn't know, and he wondered how long they had been dead. He didn't understand this time shift, and resolved to ask Quant about it later.

Quant led him into the chapel. Jerome stepped inside and sat down clumsily on a chair in front of the small altar. When he looked down, he found the cat had gone. For the time being, Jerome was on his own. He remained sitting in the chapel, trying to pull himself together as the Requiem Mass in the main body of the church progressed.

As the final benediction was given, he crossed himself, closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Aloysius sitting beside him. Aloysius nodded towards the nave, and Jerome saw the coffin being taken down the central aisle. Behind it, the Provincial led his friars in procession.

Aloysius beckoned Jerome to follow. He led him along the side aisle, and together they joined the line of their fellow friars making their way across the churchyard to the secluded graveyard beyond. This was the English Province's private cemetery — separate from the parish graveyard — in which all the friars, from the day they took their final vows, knew they would one day be laid to rest.

As they passed their own grave, Aloysius glanced apologetically at Jerome. Then they moved to the new grave dug on the far side of the old yew tree. It seemed to Jerome that a larger number of robed figures were gathered here than he had been aware of in the church. He felt emotional, almost tearful, as he looked at the scene: the living and the dead come together to pay tribute to their fellow friar, the living grouped at the front around their Provincial, the dead crowding behind them and around the grave. As the living brethren stepped forward to sprinkle the coffin with holy water, the dead friars pressed forward also and stretched out their hands in blessing.

Then the funeral service was over. The Provincial turned to have a word with Father Valentine, who had been standing on his right, and Jerome felt a familiar nudge against the hem of his habit. He looked down to find Quant beside him once more. The cat nuzzled him and moved off. Jerome glanced towards where Aloysius had been standing, but he was no longer there. Only the living chatted among themselves.

Jerome followed Quant around the yew tree. At the far side, the cat stopped and stared intently at the bark. Jerome had the wit to do the same, and hastily pictured a gate. The air thinned, his ears popped and he was back in the afterworld.

"Well," Quant said, "that went all right, didn't it?"

Jerome grinned with relief. "I did it!"

"You did."

"Can we have another go soon?" Jerome asked, knowing he sounded as if he were asking for another go at the coconut shy.

The cat gave a meowing laugh. "Have a go whenever you like."

"What? On my own? You mean, without you?"

"Why not?" Quant replied. "You know how to do it now."

"But I might get stuck, on my own. Where'd I be then?"

Quant laughed again. "Well, that would depend, wouldn't it, on where you were heading?"

"But I might get stuck in a tree," Jerome said worriedly, remembering the yew he had gone through.

"Well, there are some very nice tree nymphs around," Quant said.

Jerome looked hard at him. "You're joking, aren't you?"

The cat gave a meow of sheer fun.

"If I do get stuck," Jerome said pleadingly, "you'll come and rescue me, won't you?"

Quant gave his mocking smile but said nothing.

"Hang on!" Jerome went on quickly, afraid that Quant might do his Cheshire Cat routine again. "All right, I'll have a go on my own. But you'll keep an eye on me, won't you? You will, won't you? I mean, you won't let me get stuck and just leave me there?"

The cat's smile widened.

"You won't, will you?" Jerome persisted anxiously.

"Relax!" the cat said.

"It's all very well for you to say relax. It's easy for you. You know how to do it."

"You know how to do it."

Unconvinced, Jerome looked pleadingly at the cat.

Quant laughed again, and Jerome was certain he was about to disappear. "If I get stuck, you'll come and get me out? You promise?"

The cat meowed and vanished.

Despite Quant's reassurance, Jerome didn't feel at all confident about his ability to go around opening gates into the world he had recently left. The cat had made it look simple, but that was the mark of a professional. Then Jerome remembered his fellow deceased brethren whom he had seen at Father Angus's funeral. They'd been able to open gates and go through them. They could go back and forth: they'd got the knack. He wondered why he hadn't seen them in the afterworld. So far he had seen only Aloysius, and he was sure that was because Aloysius had wanted to say sorry to him. It occurred to him that, just as opening gates into and out of the afterworld was a knack, so seeing people in the afterworld might also be a knack. It was a technique... a technique of looking. *Looking's the key.*

If he looked hard enough, he might be able to go places; he might be able to see people and things. There could be all sorts around him. There could be anything! He had a whole new world to explore.

I need to get the hang of this looking. I must learn to concentrate so hard I can move molecules apart, make spaces to go through, spaces to see through. After all, it's not as if I've got much else to do. Well, I've nothing else to do, actually.

Jerome decided to practice. He tried to visualize a simple gate. A small, plain gate came into his mind. It had to lead somewhere, open into some place. Where did he want to go?

Recalling his trip with Quant, he thought he would like to try to return to the friary. It would be nice to have a look around the old place again. He revisited the building in his memory, and for his gateway in selected the newel post of the main staircase. It was a thick, shining column of mahogany, intricately carved with fruit and foliage. He remembered it well, and in its roundness it was reassuringly similar in shape to the pillar Quant had taken him through in the church.

He fixed it in his mind, then focused his thoughts on the task of superimposing the gate onto it. He pictured the gate, then saw it opening and the particles of matter around it parting. But already his concentration was going, and the image of the gate faded from his mind.

He began again. He frowned with the deepest concentration he could muster. A moment later he

felt the atmosphere thin. He had the impression of surging forward. His ears popped. He panicked, and found himself wedged firmly behind a wooden bunch of grapes. With horror, he realized he was stuck inside the newel post. He raised his fists and beat on the wood. Still he remained imprisoned. He tried to kick his way out.

Finally, frantically, he screamed, "Quant! Quant!"

He felt a movement beside him, of something brushing past. Then, through the fruit and foliage, he saw the cat looking at him from the hallway of the friary. His ears popped again, and he was out in the hallway himself. Trembling, he sank onto the staircase. Quant jumped nimbly onto an adjoining step and sat beside him.

"My God!" Jerome quavered.

Quant raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"Well, thanks for getting me out."

"You're welcome," the cat replied.

"My God!" Jerome repeated. He was breathing heavily and still shaking. "My God!"

"So you keep saying," Quant remarked.

"Well, it was a shock," Jerome said defensively. "Can we go back now?"

"You've only just got here."

There was a clattering from along the corridor. It came from the direction of the kitchen. Jerome panicked again. "Someone's coming!"

"Relax. It's only Iggy with the dinner trolley."

"He'll see me," Jerome whispered.

"No, he won't," Quant assured him. "He'll see *me*."

Sure enough, a robed figure pushing a rattling trolley approached, gave the cat a friendly smile, told him it would be his dinnertime soon, walked past Jerome and continued towards the dining room at the end of the corridor. As the friar and his trolley disappeared through a doorway, Jerome turned to Quant to ask him about his curious ability to live simultaneously in two worlds and to be at home in each, but Quant was quietly washing his face. Jerome thought it better to leave his question unasked. Instead, he said, "Is that the new cook?"

Quant paused with his paw in the air. He nodded. "Yes. Ignatius took over from you in the kitchen. He's a nice chap. He's not long been in the Order." He looked down the corridor towards the dining room. "Well, they're at lunch now. Do you want a look around, seeing as you're here?"

Jerome shook his head. "I want to go back, please."

"You do? Are you sure?"

Jerome nodded.

"Righty-ho!" the cat said. "If that's what you want. Anything to oblige." He stood, yawned and stretched. Then he went daintily down the stairs and stood by the newel post. "We might as well go back the way we came." He turned to Jerome, who joined him at the foot of the staircase.

Jerome took a few deep breaths as he faced the grapes once again. He felt quite trembly. He wasn't sure that he was cut out for this sort of thing. He wanted to get back now. In the afterworld he had thought longingly of his old home, but now he felt uneasy, nervous, out of his element. He didn't feel he belonged here. It wasn't his home any longer. In some mysterious way, it was still Quant's home, but it wasn't his.

It's like moving house, he thought. Once you've moved out, it's not your house anymore. You can go back, but only to visit. He wanted to be back in his new home. This wasn't his world now. "Ready!" he said eagerly.

His return journey was a lot easier than the outgoing journey had been. Jerome stared hard at the

newel post, felt his ears pop, and then he found himself in the afterworld, with Quant in front of him.

"We're back!" he shouted excitedly, looking about him. He turned to thank the cat, but Quant was no longer there. Jerome presumed that he had already returned to the friary, and he marveled again at the cat's extraordinary ability to slip from one world to another, from one state to another, and to be equally at home in both.

He's dead and alive. Quant can come and go between death and life as he pleases. He just opens a gate and goes through it.

Jerome had always respected the cat back in his days at the friary. Now he regarded the creature with awe. And he felt profoundly grateful to him. Without Quant, he would still have been trapped behind a bunch of wooden grapes. It didn't bear thinking about.

Jerome looked forward to seeing Quant again, but the cat did not reappear. Jerome tried calling him, as he had done at the friary, but he was not surprised that the cat did not respond. He knew Quant well enough now to realize that he would be back in his own good time.

He wondered what the cat was doing, and pictured him padding through the cloisters, or sitting in the kitchen waiting for his dinner... to all appearances, a domesticated pet.

Some pet! Jerome recalled the gleam of the leonine eyes. Then it occurred to him that the big desert cat had been as much of a pet as the little friary cat was. *Perhaps being a pet is what Quant does. Perhaps it's a job for him. Maybe it's his job to be friends with people and keep an eye on them, something he's been sent to do. Perhaps he's a bit of a guardian angel... but only a bit,* he thought, remembering the deep and bloody scratch the cat had given Father Fidelis.

In the animal's continued absence, he found his thoughts wandering back to the friary and his embarrassing attempt to revisit it. He was now ashamed of his panic and his desperate shouts for Quant. So while he waited for Quant to rejoin him, Jerome practiced looking. He looked at objects, and he concentrated on them. He gained confidence. The cat still didn't reappear, so he decided to attempt another trip to the friary on his own. But first he had to select a gateway.

He chose the oak desk in his old room. He could visualize it quite clearly. It was a simple piece of furniture: there was nothing there to distract him. The plain, flat, wooden rectangular top was just the place in which to insert a gate. It was even the shape of a gate. All he had to do was to put in the bars and a latch. He felt quite excited as he pictured the latch lifting and the gate swinging open.

Right! Just concentrate.

Jerome summoned up the image of the desk top and stared at it until it was fixed in his mind. Then slowly, carefully, he superimposed on it the wooden frame of his gate and looked hard at that in turn. *Here goes!*

He sensed the atmosphere around him thin. He felt himself move forward, his ears popped, he panicked, and the image was gone. Desperately, he tried to drag it back. But as he refocused his mind's eye, the rectangle lost its shape, reformed as a circle, the grain formed into rings, and the dead wood became a living tree trunk. Jerome peered out from behind a cluster of oak leaves. He couldn't believe it! Trapped again! And in a tree!

He thought he heard a meow in the distance. He pushed at the wood; he kicked it, shoved it, pounded it with his fists, but it did not give. Its particles stayed firmly in place. He remained stuck. Quant's mocking reference to tree nymphs flashed through his memory.

"Quant!" he yelled angrily. "Quant! Get me out of here!" He saw a squirrel perched on a branch look at him with interest. He glared at it. Then he glared at the tree trunk.

Chapter Two

Brother Bernard hung his habit on the hook behind his door, stuffed a plastic carrier bag into his pocket — for he usually found something of interest to collect when he went for a walk — left his room and went downstairs. In the corridor he passed his guardian, Father Fidelis, who was on his way to the parish office with a file of papers under his arm.

Fidelis looked critically at Bernard's torn jeans and unraveling Guernsey sweater, but said nothing, having better things to do than waste his breath.

Bernard left the friary by the side door and took the path that skirted the building before meandering up the hillside to the small, disused limestone quarry that lay a short distance away. It was a fine, dry morning and Bernard strolled along happily with the scent of the flowering may in his nostrils and the sun warming him through. Soon he was joined by a ginger tomcat, who rubbed against the hem of his habit. Bernard greeted him with a stroke and a friendly word. Friar and cat made their way amicably along the path for several minutes until the cat, pricking up his ears, looked along the line of oaks that bordered the path and slipped away as silently as he had appeared.

Bernard was often joined on his walks by the cat, who always showed his pleasure at seeing him, for, with Jerome gone, it was Bernard who fed him, filled saucers with milk and generally made a fuss of him, although Ignatius had taken to feeding him, too.

Bernard, like Jerome before him, knew that Father Fidelis saw no reason for anyone to feed the cat because, in his opinion, there was no shortage of mice in the outbuildings. Fidelis was not a cat lover. Indeed, he did not like animals at all, except on his plate. But it pained Bernard to see tasty scraps of food being thrown away after mealtimes, and he had soon been filling up little bowls for the cat.

That had annoyed Fidelis, who had been further irritated to find that Ignatius, too, was now slipping the animal tidbits. In a temper, he had ordered that the cat be left to catch its own dinner, but those who spent more time in the kitchen than he did quietly ignored his instructions.

What had happened to the vow of obedience, he had asked theatrically of Bernard and Ignatius one day after lunch, as he had counted out three little dishes, all filled to the rim, set out in a neat row on the kitchen floor by the back door. "Vows are vows, you know," he had added as a parting shot.

Afterwards, Bernard had laughed softly and said, "Oh aye, Father, vows are vows, right enough. We all know that."

Bernard continued on alone to the abandoned quarry. In its disused state it had evolved to form something like a small heath, much of which was grassed over and dotted with scrub and thorn bushes. Here and there, a hollow had filled up with water and formed a small pond, the green scum on its surface glinting like emeralds in the sunshine.

Half-wild sheep grazed its rough vegetation, and a few lifted their heads and glanced at him warily as he walked over to an outcrop of exposed rock that remained from the old workings. He sat down. The sheep resumed their grazing, though one or two with lambs shifted a little further away.

Bernard loved to sit here on fine summer days, watching the lambs playing. He smiled to see them bouncing up and down as if on springs. He breathed deeply, drawing into his nostrils the heavy, intoxicating scent of the may blossom in the hedges that rimmed the quarry. It made him feel quite light-headed. He loved to see the papal hues of the white hedgerows and the yellow broom, and the tufts of gray fleece caught on the thorn bushes. Here was where he felt most at home with his Maker.

On this hillside his every sense was engaged by the natural glory around him. He had been to Rome, had seen its architectural magnificence and its wondrous artistry, and had been unmoved. While

admiring the technical mastery of the great painters, sculptors and architects, he had found their art cold, silent, motionless. *Manufactured art*, he had thought.

The art Bernard loved was the art of nature. Nature's art was warm and alive. It moved and could be heard and smelled. Sitting in the sun, with sheep bleating around him, trees rustling their branches in the breeze and rooks chattering to one another on their nests, he felt as if he were surrounded by a divine living work of art. To his mind, the most subtly mixed shades of the finest paintings could not match the delicacy and variety of the colors he saw around him: whites and yellows, grays and browns, a dash of blue or purple, a rainbow of greens. Here were colors mixed by the supreme color master. Here was painting that was true art.

Contemplating the beauty around him, Bernard felt his humanity mingle with the divinity of creation. His gaze lifted to the blue sky — a blue to grace the Madonna's robe — and he passed into a trancelike state of adoration. His thoughts floated from him and absorbed themselves into the trees, the grass, the rocks. Briefly he became part of it all.

Then his upturned eyes refocused as a sparrow hawk drifted into view. With a sense of wonderment he watched it hover motionless. Then it dived and he lost sight of it.

Bernard lowered his gaze now and noticed a glint in the rocky ground at his feet. He leaned forward to pick up a gray pebble that had a gleaming marbled streak running through it; he rubbed it on his sleeve to bring out the shine and held it up to catch the sunlight. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out the plastic carrier bag and slipped the pebble into it. Here was something else for his collection.

Bernard's collection was varied: interesting pebbles and twigs, gnarled and knotted bits of tree bark, crows' and magpies' feathers, the odd jay's feather when he was lucky enough to spot one. His fellow friars joked about his carrier bag and the assorted items spread out on the wooden table in his room for much of the year, but when, each Christmas, he made a tiny crib — his personal offering to the Lord — featuring the objects he had found on the hillside and placed it in the private chapel, it was before this, rather than the big illuminated crib in the church, that the friars came to pray.

Bernard stood, folded the carrier bag and pushed it into his pocket, took a last look about him, and headed for the friary. As he passed the line of oaks, his ear picked up a faint sound, like a whisper. He turned but saw no one and thought he must have heard the breeze rustling the leaves. A few steps further on he heard the sound again. He paused once more, and looked about him more intently. He was sure he heard a whisper, not a rustle. Still he saw nothing, but he felt something brush against his leg and glanced down to see the friary cat nudging him.

"Hello, Leo," he said, bending to stroke him. As he straightened up, he heard the whisper again. "Well, I don't know where that's coming from, do you? There's no one here but us."

He turned towards the friary, but the cat didn't follow. It moved away from him and stood in front of one of the oaks.

"What's up?" Bernard asked, following him to the tree. He looked at it, then, enquiringly, at Leo.

As the animal looked back, Bernard had the strange idea that there was an expression of encouragement on its face. A branch of the oak shook a little. A leaf whirled down and the cat meowed.

"It's only a squirrel," Bernard said, as a blob of gray fur leapt from the oak into an adjacent tree and swung crazily before disappearing into the leaves. He glimpsed the creature racing down the trunk. He was about to head towards the friary once more when he saw the branch in front of him shake again, even though the squirrel had left the tree. Another leaf fell.

"Perhaps it's another squirrel," he suggested uncertainly. He was feeling uneasy now. It was getting a bit spooky.

"Well, I'm off home," he announced, with forced briskness, to the cat. "Are you coming or not?" He glanced warily at the tree, then said to Quant, "Okay, I'm going back. See you later."

The cat stared at him, holding his gaze as if to make sure that Bernard kept watching, and moved closer to the tree. Only then did he turn his head away. Bernard saw him focus on the bark. The air shimmered, the bark of the tree split open, and Bernard, in horror, saw something emerge: something in human form. He gasped with shock as he recognized Jerome. He stepped back as the late friar moved towards him.

"My God!" he whispered. He crossed himself and started a hasty Hail Mary.

But Jerome stopped his advance and looked about him. He didn't seem interested in Bernard and he was clearly in a temper about something.

"Where's that cat?" Jerome shouted.

"Cat?" Bernard echoed weakly, collapsing onto a handy tree stump. He glanced round, but the animal was gone. "My God! Jerry!"

Jerome appeared to notice him for the first time. "Oh, hi, Bernie!" He looked around again, then back at the tree from which he had issued. "I suppose this is that cat's idea of a joke," he said sourly.

Bernard trembled quietly on his tree stump. Hesitantly he asked, "How do you mean, a joke?"

Jerome pointed to the tree and said, "Well, I was stuck in there like some damn tree nymph."

Bernard said nothing. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"What's bothering me now," Jerome went on irritably, "is how I'm going to get back."

"Get back?"

"Well, I can't stay here, can I?"

"Er, no, I suppose not," Bernard agreed uncertainly, then he forced confidence into his voice. "But you're dead, Jerry!"

"Correct."

"Well, what are you doing here?"

Jerome did not immediately answer.

Bernard said unhappily, "You must be a ghost." He stared miserably at his late friend. "Have you come to haunt me?"

"Haunt you?" Jerome gave a laugh that sounded hollow even to him. "No, of course not. Why should I want to haunt you?"

"I don't know. But if you're not haunting me, what are you doing here?"

"Ah!" Jerome said.

Bernard was astonished to see a look of embarrassment on Jerome's face. He waited.

Jerome shuffled a bit. "It all went wrong," he admitted.

"What did?" Bernard found he was becoming interested.

"Well, I came for a look round," Jerome told him. He shuffled again, looked down at his feet and mumbled, "But I got stuck, in that tree."

"Um, why were you in a tree?" Bernard asked, puzzled.

"I didn't mean to be in a tree. I meant to come out in my room. But I got sort of... diverted."

"Oh!" Bernard was plainly struggling with the concept of celestial highway diversions.

"I was aiming for my desk, if you must know. But it's made of wood, and it sort of turned into a tree — that tree!" Jerome pointed at it accusingly.

"Oh!" Bernard said again, obviously still struggling. After a moment he asked, "Why did you want to go into the desk?"

"Well, I had to have a gate, didn't I?"

"Er, possibly so," Bernard agreed, then added, a shade defiantly, "but it's not your room anymore."

"Whose is it?"

"It's mine now," Bernard admitted reluctantly.

"Oh, so you've moved in, have you?"

"Well, yes," Bernard said defensively. "I didn't think you were coming back."

"I didn't think I was, either."

"Er, do you mind me having your room?" Bernard asked, adding, "It's nicer than the one I had before."

"Of course I don't mind. I'd like you to have it."

"Thanks," Bernard said, relieved.

Jerome looked with some uncertainty at the tree. "Well, I'd better be getting back, I suppose. Um...."

Bernard asked cautiously, "Do you want any help?"

"I'm not sure." Jerome sounded embarrassed. "I might do. It's not easy, you know." He cocked his ear. "No, the cat's not here. Or if he is, he's lying doggo." He gave another sepulchral laugh.

Bernard shuddered slightly before asking, "What's the cat got to do with it?" Then he remembered the animal's actions earlier. "Oh yes, he got you out of the tree, didn't he? Amazing, that." His tone was admiring. "I didn't know cats could do such a thing."

"I don't suppose they all can," Jerome said slowly. "It might only be Quant. He's special. Normal rules don't apply to him."

"Quant? Leo, you mean. Leo's the cat's name, Jerry."

"Oh, yes, so it is." Jerome was feeling too weak to explain. His anger had worn off, and he was anxious and worried about his return journey. "Well, I'll be off then." With a marked lack of enthusiasm, he glided towards the tree. Then he turned and looked pleadingly at Bernard.

"What would you like me to do?" Bernard asked reluctantly.

"Come here." Jerome indicated a spot beside him.

Nervously Bernard moved forward.

"Now," Jerome said, "look hard at that tree. Really, really hard. Stare at it."

"Like this?" Bernard bent forward and focused intently on the tree.

"Just like that!" Jerome was impressed. "Quant would be proud of you."

Bernard let the name pass this time. An idea was forming in the depth of his mind.

"And think gates," Jerome said.

"Gates. Right," Bernard said. "Um, any particular sort of gate?"

"No. Any gate. Any old gate. Just something I can go through."

"A gate in the tree?"

"Yup."

"Right," Bernard said again, his gaze still glued to the tree. He frowned with concentration as he pictured a gate opening in the bark.

Suddenly the air seemed to waver in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a movement. He heard a shout of, "See you." The shout softened to a whisper, and then all he could hear was the rustling of leaves in the breeze.

Another movement caught his attention, and he glanced up to see a squirrel watching him with interest and curiosity from an overhanging branch. Then he heard a meow and felt something brush against his leg. He looked down and saw the cat. He bent to stroke him, then straightened up and looked at the tree trunk. He reached out and patted its rough, solid surface.

"Well!" he said, looking sharply at the cat. "You were watching all the time, weren't you?"

The cat rubbed against his leg.

"You wanted me to do it, didn't you?"

Leo stood daintily on tiptoe and nuzzled him.

"You're a dark horse!" Bernard told him. Then, tentatively, he said, "Quant?"

The cat looked up at him, and his glowing eyes seemed to draw Bernard into their depths.

Bernard felt unnerved, and turned for the friary.

The cat accompanied him.

Bernard held the kitchen door open for Leo to precede him, and as he watched the animal wander over to his food bowl he recalled Jerome's parting words, "See you."

He also remembered that he was occupying Jerome's old room. He felt suddenly chilly, despite the sunshine pouring in through the kitchen window.

Chapter Three

Father Valentine watched the congregation file out. *Why*, he wondered as he took in the back view of Serena Sinclair, *do the girls with the fattest legs wear the shortest skirts?* He shuddered at the sight of her. Even if he were not on a diet himself, he wouldn't have an appetite for this particular dish, a dish he knew to be readily available. This girl was the good time that was had by all. *Still, give her credit for coming to Mass every Sunday morning, and for being so cheerful.*

Serena was followed by that pillar of the community, Harry Walls, with his prim little wife trotting dutifully by his side. The latter was casting glances of obvious, not to say theatrical, disapproval at Serena's exposed, substantial thighs.

Valentine did not particularly like the Walls. He was unconvinced by the man's frequent references to his distinguished army service and his high-ranking civil service posts, and suspected that they owed more to wishful thinking than to strict accuracy. Valentine put him down as a Walter Mitty type. The wife, he found cloying. She appeared to be devoted to her husband, to whom she clung like a limpet. She hung onto his every word, glanced at him continually for prompting, watched his every move as a cue to what her own next move should be. It was as if without him she wouldn't exist. She was a satellite circling in his orbit, a moon to his planet.

Serena, on the other hand, was a sun, blazing on her own account, gloriously casting her light and warmth in all directions. The girl gave radiantly of herself, brightening and cheering lives for miles around. Valentine grinned as he saw her turn in the doorway and beam in the friendliest manner at the Walls. He couldn't see their faces, but he could picture their sour reciprocal smiles.

Serena and the Walls were as different as chalk and cheese. For the Walls, respectability was clearly everything. Valentine doubted that the word 'respectability' was even in Serena's vocabulary. He imagined the couple on the path outside, hurrying to get away from her.

The Walls had arrived in the district a couple of years ago, and Valentine had been puzzled as to why they should have chosen this particular spot to retire to. They had no links with the place that he knew of, and he found it curious that an elderly couple should decide to uproot themselves and make for an area where they knew no one. He had found himself wondering if they had been attracted to the village precisely because it was an unknown quantity. Or had they moved there because they themselves were unknown? After all, people knew only what the Walls had chosen to reveal about themselves, and nothing more.

It had occurred to Valentine that the couple had created an ideal opportunity to reinvent themselves and make a fresh start, and he wondered if this might have been their prime motive in making such an apparently adventurous move. He had then gone on to speculate as to what their real background might have been. But he had begun to imagine all sorts of dramatic scenarios and, in the end, had had to tell himself not to be so fanciful.

Now, with the Walls having left the church, he turned his attention to the village's odd-job man, Fred Warne, who was nearing the door. Valentine smiled for the umpteenth time at the rear view of Fred's head. Fred was a genial old soul, always ready to help out with a bit of gardening or painting, but he had a weakness. Some degree of vanity made him grimly determined to defy and disguise his almost complete baldness. He parted low, just above one ear, what little hair remained on his glistening scalp. The tiny bit of hair below his parting he cut and combed normally. The sparse strands above his parting he grew into a slim rope. This he coiled round and round his head. This intriguing hairstyle, which fooled no one except Fred himself, was a source of wonderment to Valentine. As he watched

the old man pass through the door, he reflected that while Fred undoubtedly possessed one mirror, he almost certainly did not possess two. Valentine smiled to himself, but there was warmth, not malice, in his smile, for he genuinely liked Fred and valued his contribution to the life of the community. The old chap was always there, ready to lend a hand. Valentine thought every village needed a Fred Warne.

As Fred made his way out, Valentine's gaze moved to an elderly, motherly-looking woman sitting in a pew, rummaging in her handbag. A slender, elegant lady in a sharply tailored suit paused graciously on her way up the aisle and spoke to her. Ellen Done looked up and responded with a polite smile, a nod and a few words.

Valentine's eyes narrowed as he watched the exchange. He knew that Ellen felt no goodwill towards her former employer. The money she had earned doing the housework for Susan Jay had come in handy, for she was a widow with few resources, apart from her skills as a cleaner — which, in Valentine's view, were considerable. Ellen had been greatly put out when her little cash-in-hand job had ended abruptly, without explanation. Mrs. Jay had taken care to try to mend fences with her former domestic, but Valentine, who had managed to find a few hours' work for Ellen in the church and the parish rooms, knew that the damage had been done. Ellen had not forgiven or forgotten Mrs. Jay's treatment of her, though she was clever enough to mask her resentment.

Valentine had been surprised when Ellen had told him she was no longer needed at The Elms; and his surprise had turned to mystification when, shortly after Ellen's departure, a young man had moved into the house and had been seen brushing up outside and putting out bin bags. Who he was and what he was no one knew, and Susan Jay had said nothing to enlighten anyone. Oblique enquiries had been met with a bright, no comment sort of smile and inconsequential remarks about forthcoming village events, weather for the time of year, and so on. Valentine had suggested to Ellen that the young man might be a relative, but Ellen had snorted at this suggestion, given him a withering look and carried on with her mopping.

As Mrs. Jay turned towards the door, Valentine saw Ellen direct a penetrating look at her, before turning her attention back to her handbag.

As the last few members of the congregation made their way out, Valentine's gaze ranged round the emptying church. He saw Brother Bernard in the shadows at the back jotting down, as usual, the number who had attended the service. This was a number that would later appear on the friary notice board, under the heading BoP — which stood for bums on pews — together with the relevant date and time of Mass. He noticed Fidelis chatting in the aisle with the new parishioner who had moved into Hillside Cottage. Valentine saw her rest her hand lightly on his arm before the two parted. He smiled as he saw Bernard dart a glance in the guardian's direction as the latter disappeared through the side door into the friary.

Evidently he wasn't the only one to suspect that Fidelis might be up to his old tricks. Semper Fidelis. Leopards don't change their spots; he might have known. There he'd been thinking that Fidelis had quieted down at last and was making some attempt to be faithful to his vow of chastity, and all it had taken had been the sight of a new and attractive, if ageing, face in the pews to set him aflutter all over again. Valentine sighed.

Fidelis had always been a ladies' man. And the ladies had always had an eye for him. With his strong, handsome face, his ready smile, and his still-fair hair that seemed to draw the sunlight, he was a magnet for the more susceptible women in his congregation. He charmed them. Indeed, he was known in the Order as Father Charisma.

In the last year or two, though, he had seemed, well, not exactly to have lost his eye for the ladies, but to have been viewing them differently. He still saw them, all right, he still sparkled in their presence, but it was almost as if their importance for him had diminished, as if they'd had their time center stage

and were moving towards the wings, becoming part of the cast, part of the ensemble. Whether Fidelis had consciously tried to mend his ways or whether he was simply feeling the effects of age, Valentine had been unable to decide.

Whatever. All that seemed to have changed with the advent of the newcomer. Valentine wondered what it was about Clare Kesteven that had set his guardian a-jitter. She was nice-looking, and had probably been quite a stunner in her day, but there was nothing about her, as far as he could see, to set her apart from others who had tried and failed to tempt Fidelis from the path of virtue he had finally set foot on. There must be something about her, Valentine thought, as he watched her leave the building. He couldn't identify what it was, but he hoped she didn't mean trouble.

Valentine's thoughts were on his guardian as he made his way upstairs to his room after lunch. Valentine had not enjoyed lunchtime, having been publicly, and in his view unjustifiably, reprimanded by Fidelis for having missed early morning prayers. He had been about to remind him that he had been called out in the early hours to attend a dying resident at a nearby nursing home, when he had thought better of it. Remembering his vow of obedience, he had carried on eating his meal. However, he had been able to tell by the uneasy silence that had followed those few sharp words that others also thought the reprimand uncalled for. Fidelis had been unfair, and everyone knew it. But he had responded with a flutter of his hand and a nod of the head, and they'd understood not to make an issue of it. Fidelis was their guardian, and they were vowed to submit to his authority.

But Valentine wondered again about Fidelis's recent change of mood: he was normally an affable, accommodating sort of chap, and 'live and let live' had pretty much been his motto. Lately, however, in the privacy of the friary, amongst his brethren, he had become ratty and intolerant. He seemed to have something on his mind, something he didn't want to talk about but that appeared to trouble him deeply.

Valentine speculated as to what dark problem might be casting its shadow over his guardian's normally sunny nature, and came to the conclusion that it probably involved the new parishioner. Fidelis's altered humor had become apparent around the time of her arrival on the scene, when he had, true to form, taken to visiting her at home quite frequently — in his capacity as parish priest, of course — just to welcome her and help her settle in. Or so he said.

Had she rekindled in him a fire he'd thought put out? Valentine could see that she might have attracted him, with her pale skin, high cheekbones, and long, sandy-colored hair piled up in a froth of curls and wisps, though he didn't like the bright red lipstick she wore, as it looked to him at a distance like a splash of blood on her thin lips. Neither did he like her matching painted nails. They seemed talon-like, predatory.

As he walked back along the landing, he wondered if he might be able to find out something about her. But with Fidelis the parish priest as well as the guardian, he had little excuse himself to go visiting parishioners without invitation. And he didn't seem likely to receive one.

The woman had been pleasant enough on the few occasions they had met face to face, but he'd noticed that her eyes kept straying towards Fidelis, and she had shown no interest in prolonging her conversations with himself. So far he had not been able to chat to her for long enough to pick up any clues as to why she had moved to the village. All he knew was that she had been introduced as Mrs. Kesteven. She lived on her own, so presumably she was separated from her husband, or widowed. He'd heard she had a daughter visiting at present — Pacificus had seen them walking together. Ah, Pacificus, Fidelis's spiritual adviser and confessor. He might know what was going on, if anything was. Not that he'd tell, though.

As Valentine pushed open his bedroom door, it struck him that Pacificus had been behaving

oddly himself of late. The notoriously short-fused friar, normally given to exploding at the slightest provocation, had been distinctly subdued in recent weeks. Instead of raging at every thing and person that annoyed him, he had been disappearing into what passed for the friary vegetable garden, to do some furious digging, as if grimly determined to work out his bout of temper there. Maybe there was something going on, and Pacificus knew about it and didn't like it. *Well*, thought Valentine, *at least we'll get some vegetables out of it.*

Valentine sighed. Fidelis was a good parish priest, a good man in his way, but he had caused some headaches in the Order in the past and had been dispatched more than once at short notice to another house when things had gotten too hot. Everyone had their weakness, their frailty, and Fidelis's weakness — well, his *main* weakness — was women. And women and Catholic priests were a combustible mixture.

Back in his room, Valentine decided to have a snooze. He sat down in his armchair and closed his eyes. Tired as he was, though, he didn't manage to doze off, and after a few minutes he got up and went to his bookcase, thinking that a leisurely look through one of his books might help. He knew that if it didn't, at least it might provide him with some thoughts for his next sermon.

As he passed his window, he glanced out and noticed Fidelis's blue car gliding down the drive, away from the friary. He watched it halt at the gate, then turn right onto the main road, and right again into a little-used lane that potted along over the hill to a nearby village.

He left his room and walked across to a small leaded window on the far side of the landing. Looking out, he watched the car reappear near the crest of the hill, then turn off the road into a shrub-lined driveway that led to a whitewashed cottage: Hillside Cottage.

Valentine saw the car pass the side of the building and disappear round the back. He remained staring out of the window. He hummed a few notes, accompanying himself by drumming his fingers on the stone sill. Then he went back to his room.

He looked along the shelves of his bookcase, pulled out a volume on art and carried it to his armchair. He settled back, opened the book at the chapter on the Pre-Raphaelites and turned to the section on William Holman Hunt. Holman Hunt's paintings soothed Valentine when he needed soothing, inspired him when he needed inspiring, and provided him with setting-off points for his journeys of meditation. He leafed through the pages, looking at the familiar, beloved illustrations. He stopped turning the pages when he came to *Our English Coasts*, leaned comfortably into the cushions and gazed at the picture.

This was one of his favorites. He never tired of looking at the effects of the sunlight on the fleeces of the *Strayed Sheep* and on the sea, the grass and the cliff-face; he thought this painting a perfect study in light and shadow. He admired the harmony of the shades and colors on the printed page for a few moments, then closed his eyes and viewed them again in his imagination.

When he opened his eyes, he looked across to the latticed window framing the view outside. He saw sun-dappled leaves fluttering in the light breeze and puffs of fluffy white clouds floating past in a coloring-book blue sky. *So perfect a summer's day*, he thought, *that it might be a parody: Nature in cartoon mode.* But, weather apart, he was finding the day far from perfect.

His thoughts drifted back to what he had seen through the landing window, and he watched again in his mind's eye his guardian's blue car turning off the road into the driveway of Hillside Cottage.

Valentine wondered idly how the woman had got to hear about the cottage being vacant, and supposed it had been put on a leasing agent's list sometime after the death of the previous owner. He wasn't sure who owned it now. He laid his book on the small table beside his chair. He didn't know why, but he couldn't stop thinking about the woman.

Fidelis had called on her soon after she had moved in, after noticing her at Mass. It hadn't gone

unnoticed among the friars that he had continued to visit her, and Father Peter, his bright eyes sparkling with mischief, had remarked one mealtime on the frequency of these pastoral visits. Fidelis, after a moment's thought, had said that he was helping her settle in.

"Oh, really?" Peter had said, his gaunt face lit with amusement.

"Well, you know how it is when you move to a new area..." Fidelis had replied defensively. His voice had tailed off at this point, and he had reached across the table to pour more water into his glass, though it hadn't been empty at the time. Valentine had noticed this particularly, because his guardian's hand had been shaking and he had spilled water onto the tablecloth.

He thought Peter had noticed, too. Not much, Valentine reflected, escaped those sharp eyes of his. However, Peter hadn't said anything further. He was one of the more subtle friars, often enjoying a little joke at someone's expense without their realizing it. As a result, he got some light entertainment and no one's feelings were hurt.

It was important in the friary not to hurt people's feelings unnecessarily. With people living close together, with their tensions and stresses, a calm atmosphere — or as calm as could be managed — was essential. All of them knew that, and they took care most of the time not to cross boundaries best left uncrossed.

Pacificus's outbursts were accepted because everyone knew he meant nothing by them and they'd be over in no time. And anyway, that was just the way he was. Valentine smiled as he reflected how misnamed Pacificus was. He wondered why he had chosen to be called that. At the time Pacificus had entered the Order, it had been the custom to adopt a new name, though now it was optional and most friars chose to keep their Christian names. Valentine found it hard to think of anyone less pacific than Pacificus. Not that Pacificus was the only one to have chosen a name to which he was ill suited. Valentine smiled as he reflected that Modestus wasn't the most modest of men, nor Felix the happiest — he was always moaning about his bad luck. Fidelis could have chosen a better name, too, though presumably he had intended keeping faith with his vows.

Valentine was glad he hadn't renamed himself. He was sure that if he had done so, he would have hit on something laughably inappropriate.

He glanced once more at the illustration in the book on the table beside him. *Strayed Sheep*. That would be the theme for his sermon. He was about to shut his eyes again when a shaft of sunlight swept the room as brightly as a torch beam, and lingered for a moment on the old wooden crucifix fixed to the wall above his bed.

Valentine gazed at his crucified Lord. In the brilliant light the ivory figure nailed to the cross glowed. The red blood trickling from its side burned like fire. For an instant Valentine had the impression that time and place had slipped away and that his pierced Lord hung before him in the flesh, His blood still flowing. Then a cloud must have crossed the face of the sun again, for the light dimmed, the glowing body on the cross darkened, and the flaming blood became a deep red stain. Valentine closed his eyes.

After the evening meal, as most of the friars made their way to the lounge to watch television, Valentine went into the kitchen, made himself a mug of coffee and took it to his room. He put it on his small table, fetched his sketchpad and pencils, and settled comfortably in his armchair. He was working on a design for the friary Christmas card. Valentine, trained as an artist, was delighted to find his skills welcomed and put to use, for, remembering tales of talents frowned upon and interests discouraged, he had quite expected, when he joined the Order, to be told to leave his past life behind him.

To his joy, he had not only been encouraged to continue drawing and painting but had been permitted to accept selected local commissions, with the result that the friars enjoyed free drinks on the rare occasions that they visited The White Horse — with its smart new hanging sign depicting a

spirited white charger bearing a marked resemblance to Napoleon's mount as painted by Jacques-Louis David — and *The Old Mill*, for which Valentine had painted a quaint watermill that owed much to Constable's *Parham's Mill*.

Valentine was a clever artist, but he needed a trigger, something to fire him, something to spark his imagination and set him off. Then he might wander but a short distance from the source of his inspiration, or he might roam further afield. But always he was a figurative artist. Abstract art was not for him. Valentine developed his pictures from what he saw, and his subject matter remained recognizable. He meant it to. He drew from life, he copied and adapted the art of the masters, and he stayed close to his models. He wanted people to be able to read his pictures for themselves, to understand them without needing to have them explained. When he painted symbols into his pictures, he painted symbols people could interpret for themselves. He painted scenes the viewer felt he might visit, landscapes he might step into, faces he might meet. He greatly admired Turner, but he preferred Constable and Gainsborough.

He tried a few designs featuring mangers, hay, donkeys, camels and palm trees, looked at them critically and set them to one side. Experimentally, he sketched his local scene, drawing the hillside and setting the large stone-built friary in the middle, with its adjacent square-towered church with its lychgate and graveyard. On the left, he put in the thorn-hedged lane that wandered up the hill, passing on its way the small, white cottage. He studied this picture thoughtfully and drew another version, this time moving the church to the center. Then he added a star shining brightly above the church tower, and a few figures making their way to the door. He looked approvingly at his drawing and wondered how his guardian would feel about a local setting. He added a touch of yellow to the star, a dash of gray to the friary and the church, and of white to the cottage on the hill.

As he put the pencil down, he smiled as he recalled his guardian's barely disguised irritation at teatime at having been asked by Oliver — his cheerful, rosy face aglow with innocence and friendly interest — how the new lady at Hillside Cottage was getting on. Fidelis had not replied at first, but when Oliver had repeated his enquiry more loudly, as if in the belief that he had not been heard the first time, Fidelis had looked up as if just realizing the question had been addressed to him.

"Oh, all right," he'd said casually.

"Settling in, is she?"

There had been a slight pause before Fidelis had replied, "She seems to be."

"Likes the cottage, does she?"

"As far as I know." Fidelis had sounded bored, as if the conversation did not interest him.

"I expect she's got it very nice," Oliver had continued chattily. "I saw you going up there this afternoon. I thought I might call on her myself one day, to ask her if she'd like to help out at our charity lunch in the parish hall next month."

"Why not?" Fidelis had said. "She might do." With that, he had turned to Pacificus, who was sitting beside him, and had talked about the garden. Oliver had not seemed at all put out by his guardian's switching attention away from him and had genially begun a conversation with Ignatius about the week's shopping. Valentine knew, though, that Oliver's air of bumbling goodwill masked an observant eye and a razor-sharp mind.

As he turned to his sketch once more, he heard a soft tap at his door and called to the visitor to enter.

Peter came into the room and shut the door behind him. "May I?" He picked up Valentine's sketches and looked at them admiringly. He studied with particular care the one Valentine had just been working on, and then held it at arm's length. "That's nice," he said admiringly. "I like the local setting."

"Thanks," Valentine said. "I'll show it to Fidelis and ask him what he thinks. He may not like the local scene."

Peter stroked his neat beard thoughtfully, glanced at the closed door, then at Valentine, and said softly, "I think he likes the local scene well enough."

"You do?" Valentine looked into Peter's mischievous gray eyes.

"Oh, yes. Don't you?"

Valentine nodded. "He seems to."

Peter grinned. "I nearly laughed out loud when Olly asked him about that woman at tea-time." He handed Valentine's sketch back. "By the way, I think you've left something out."

"I have?" Valentine asked. "What?"

"This." Peter picked up a blue pencil and indicated the driveway of the white cottage. He handed the pencil to Valentine. "You need to put a blue car turning into the drive."

Valentine laughed, but made no addition to his sketch. He stood, gathered his sketchpad and pencils, carried them over to his chest of drawers and arranged them neatly along the top. Then he passed a small box to Peter. "Humbug?"

"Thanks." Peter took one. As he threw the wrapping into the wastepaper bin, he said quietly, after another glance at the door, "Something's going on."

"I know," Valentine agreed, "but how can we find out what?"

"We could try asking."

Valentine shook his head. "There's only Pacificus we could ask — apart from Fidelis, of course. Pacificus is his spiritual adviser. He might know, but he'd never tell."

"Well, I could try having a word with my own spiritual adviser."

Valentine looked surprised. "Olly doesn't know any more than we do."

"I wasn't talking about Olly," Peter said slyly.

"Oh. You mean Sibylla?"

"She's worth a try."

Valentine looked uncertain. "Well, you know we're not supposed to...."

Peter cut him short. "There are plenty of things we're not supposed to do, but rules don't always stop us, do they?"

Valentine still looked doubtful. "I don't know.... Oh, all right. Go on, then. Why not?"

"I'll go over tomorrow. I'm free in the morning, and I've got a bit of shopping to do anyway. I want to get a birthday card for my niece. I'll pop in and see Sibylla then." Peter helped himself to another humbug. "See you." The door closed behind him.

Chapter Four

The next morning, on his way to the outbuilding where he kept his motorbike, Peter glanced up as he passed his guardian's study window. Seeing Fidelis looking out at him, he waved cheerfully. Fidelis returned his wave, but Peter glimpsed the frown. He wondered whether the sight of his black leather biking gear had caused it, or whether his guardian, wrestling with some problem, had been frowning before he had come into view.

As he wheeled his bike into the yard, he bent to stroke the friary cat who had emerged from the shadows of the building. The cat sat in the doorway and watched him as he started the machine. It was still watching as he drove down the path.

Twenty minutes later, Peter stopped outside a small bungalow in a suburban cul-de-sac, pushed his bike up the drive and propped it out of sight behind a large water barrel. He walked round to the front door of the bungalow and rang the bell. A plump, middle-aged woman in a flower-patterned apron opened the door. She beamed and clasped his hand warmly.

"Hi, Sibylla," he said.

"Come in, deary." Mrs. Sibylla Smith waved him into the hallway. "I was half-expecting you."

"Only half?"

Sibylla Smith — otherwise known as Gypsy Smith (née Petulengro, of genuine Romany stock) and often to be found in a gaudily painted kiosk at the end of the pier in a nearby seaside town — gave a chuckle and nudged him in the ribs in a fair imitation of the late Dick Emery en travesti. Peter almost expected her to say, "Ooh, you are a one!"

As she ushered in the black-leather-clad friar, indistinguishable from a Hell's Angel, she remarked admiringly, "I like your gear. It's very fetching."

"Thanks. One has to make the effort."

"I couldn't agree more, deary." Sibylla indicated a chair at the dining room table.

Peter put his shiny black motorcycle helmet on an armchair and sat down as directed. Behind him on the wall was a large mirror in an ornate gilt frame. Sibylla went to her sideboard and picked up an object lying on it, wrapped in black silk. She carried it reverently to the table and put it down carefully. Then she drew up a chair for herself. She unwrapped the crystal ball and folded the silk neatly into a square and laid it on the table beside her. She positioned the crystal in front of her. "Right, deary." She looked at Peter. "Was there anything in particular?"

Peter gazed into her searching brown eyes and felt suddenly nervous.

As if sensing his unease, Sibylla said quickly, soothingly, with a glance into the mirror behind his head, "Well, we'll just have a little look, shall we? See what we can see? Then, if you want to ask me any questions, you can do so."

Peter nodded, and in response to a signal from her, stretched out his hands and placed them around the crystal ball for a few seconds.

"Thank you, deary." Sibylla leaned forward as she studied the crystal. She reached up a chubby arm to push back a strand of graying hair that had fallen across her face from her loosely coiled bun. She looked from the crystal to Peter. "There's a bit of trouble back home, is there?"

Peter didn't answer.

Sibylla went on, "I'm getting tension, stress, things not quite right. I can't see where it's coming from." She peered at the crystal and took his hand for a moment. "Your head chappie — there are problems there, I think." She looked at Peter, but still he said nothing. Sibylla glanced again at the

crystal. She gasped in surprise and subjected it to a more intense scrutiny. "That's strange!"

"What is?"

But Sibylla didn't answer him. She studied the crystal ball, then looked up into the mirror. She shook her head, as if not quite believing what she saw in either the crystal or the mirror. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed, turning back to the crystal. Then she frowned. "Drat!"

"What is it?" Peter asked.

Sibylla continued staring at the crystal, as if willing it to communicate with her. Then she looked up into Peter's enquiring eyes. "Sorry, deary. That seems to be it." She shrugged her plump shoulders apologetically.

Peter's face registered his disappointment.

"Sorry," Sibylla said again. "It's gone. I can't get it back."

"What did you see?" Peter asked, and was surprised to see a flush of embarrassment spread across Sibylla's face.

"Well," she replied, after a brief hesitation, "I was getting on all right at first. I saw your head chappie, like I said. He was sitting with his head in his hands, like he was really down in the dumps. Then..." Sibylla's voice tailed off.

"Then what?"

"Well, I don't quite know what to make of it," Sibylla confessed. "I saw another of your chappies."

"What did he look like?"

"Thin. Brown hair. Beard. Blue eyes."

With a shrug of his slim shoulders, Peter politely conveyed the idea that this identification was not particularly helpful. "Anything else?"

"He was dead."

"Dead? Oh!" Peter looked surprised now. Thoughtfully he asked, "How dead? Long dead? Recently dead?"

"It's hard to say. There's no time in the spirit world."

"Very dead?" Peter persisted. "Do you think he's someone who died a long time ago?"

Sibylla closed her eyes in an effort to recall what she had seen. "I don't think so. I might be wrong, but I don't feel it's that long since he passed over."

"Did he have a message?"

"I don't know, deary. If he did, he didn't stay long enough to tell me what it was." She looked perplexedly into Peter's gray eyes. "He was gone too quickly." She frowned. "It was as if... he'd been taken away."

"Taken away? By whom?"

"Well, that's the strange thing. This cat appeared beside him and then they both vanished. It was as if... well, as if it had come to take him away."

The friar and the fortune-teller stared at each other, both clearly baffled. Then Sibylla declared decisively, "Well, that's it, I'm afraid." She picked up the square of black silk, unfolded it and gently wrapped it around the crystal ball. She glanced into the mirror, then pushed back her chair with an air of finality. "Sorry, deary. Sorry you've had a wasted journey."

"I haven't, Sibylla. How can any journey be wasted when it gives me the pleasure of your company?" Peter assured her gallantly.

Sibylla nudged him in the ribs again, and Peter laughed as he picked up his motorcycle helmet.

In the hallway Sibylla took his arm. "You'll say a little prayer for me, Father?"

"I'll say a *big* prayer for you, Sibylla." Peter patted her shoulder paternally.

In a reversal of their roles, she now sought his spiritual assistance. In an arrangement that suited them both, his visits to her saw the friendly exchange of one type of spiritual service for another.

At the front door priest and clairvoyant clasped hands. "Sorry about the loss of vision," Sibylla said softly as Peter stepped outside.

"Think no more of it. Bye, Sibylla. I'll be seeing you."

Peter wheeled his bike down the drive. At the gate he turned to give Sibylla a farewell wave and saw her standing in the doorway looking puzzled. He was quite puzzled himself by the episode, both by the failure of her hitherto reliable system of crystal ball with mirror backup (or was it, despite her fussy rituals with the crystal, the other way round?) and by the identity of the deceased friar who had put in a brief appearance before being whisked away from the scene by a cat. A cat?

The Reverend George Venables said goodbye to his curate and continued his stroll along the high street to the mail box. After posting his letters, he turned to cross the road to return to the vicarage. Seeing a motorbike approaching from the far end of the street, he waited to let it pass. As it drew near, however, it slowed and its rider pulled over to the curbside. The Reverend Venables stepped forward, his arm outstretched. The motorbike rider pulled off a leather gauntlet and shook his hand.

"How are you, Father?" the Reverend Venables enquired warmly.

"Fine, thanks, George," Peter answered. "And how are you?"

George gestured towards the vicarage. "Do you fancy a coffee?"

Peter glanced at his watch, and nodded. "Why not? I don't have to be back just yet." Pushing his bike, he accompanied the vicar to his home.

Waving aside the offer of an armchair in the lounge, Peter followed his friend into the kitchen and sat down. George disappeared into the pantry and came out with a packet of chocolate biscuits. He made the coffee, put the biscuits on a plate and joined Peter at the table.

"Well?" Peter said. "How are things?"

George looked at him and said nothing.

"Not so good, then?"

George shook his head. "God, you don't know how lucky you are, being celibate."

"I do," Peter assured him. He pushed the plate across the table. "Have a biscuit."

"Thanks," George said. "I don't mind if I do." He chewed his biscuit. "I wish I could go into a monastery. It'd just suit me down to the ground."

"Well, you can't. And it probably wouldn't suit you at all." Peter took another biscuit himself and said, "No, you're called to the married state. Marriage is a vocation as much as celibacy is."

"But marriage is such hard work," complained the vicar.

"Celibacy isn't a doddle, either."

The two men looked at each other, then laughed.

Peter said, "I think you're just going through a bad patch. Stick with it. Things will get better. They always do."

"No, they don't. Not always. Sometimes they get worse." George stared into his coffee cup. "God, why did I ever marry her? It beats me what I ever saw in her."

"Betty's all right."

"Would you want to live with her?"

"Well, no," Peter admitted, but added quickly, "but then marriage isn't my scene at all."

"I don't think it's mine, either," George said despondently.

"Offer it up."

"Offer what up?"

"Your marriage. Regard it as a trial, if you must, and offer it up to God."

George looked baffled, then said, "You mean, as a sort of suffering? A cross to be borne?"

"Something like that."

George drank his coffee thoughtfully. "Yes, I see what you mean. I think I do anyway." He was silent for a moment. "Yes, I'll try that." He looked at Peter. "What really gets my goat is that she's running the local branch of Relate. If anyone needs marriage guidance counseling, it's her. She's the devil to live with."

"Steady on!"

George seemed to realize what he had just said and gave an embarrassed smile.

Peter, thinking it was time they changed the subject, asked, "How's your new curate getting on?"

"Tim? Oh, all right." George regarded his friend. "He's a nice enough chap in his way."

Peter gazed back questioningly.

George ate another biscuit before continuing, "He's not married, you know."

Peter shrugged and said nothing.

"I'm not too sure," George went on, "of his... predilections."

Peter stared at him. "Do you mean... choirboys?"

"Well, we haven't got much of a choir, but maybe it's just as well."

"Well, well, I'd no idea."

"I'm not sure he's aware of it himself. It's just a feeling I've got about him. Call it a hunch, no more."

"Well!" Peter said again.

"I might be wrong," said George. "Let's hope I am." He glanced at the kitchen clock. "Will you stay for lunch, Peter?"

Peter pushed back his chair. "Thanks, George, but no. I'm only signed out for the morning. The guardian will be asking questions if I'm not back."

"Have you been to town?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, I had a bit of shopping to do." He held out his hand. "Well, it's nice to see you, as ever." He followed the vicar through the hall. "Don't forget. Offer it up."

"I will," George said. "You've made me see it in a new light." As he opened the door, he asked quietly, "As to the other matter, you'll keep it to yourself, won't you?"

"Of course I will. You should know better than to ask."

"Thanks."

A few minutes later, Peter turned off the road and passed through the friary gates. As he approached the outbuilding that served as a garage, he saw Bernard in his ragged jeans and jersey busily brushing out the yard. On a nearby windowsill Leo, the friary cat, sat in the sun placidly observing the activity. Peter noticed the cat turn his head away from Bernard and gaze at him. The sunlight must have caught the cat's eyes for they shone like gold. For a brief, unsettling moment, Peter had the impression of being held in the beam of a dazzling, golden searchlight. Then the cat turned his attention back to Bernard, and for Peter it was as if the searchlight had been switched off as suddenly as it had been switched on. He pushed his bike into the outbuilding and felt glad to be in the shadowy interior.

"What did you think you were doing?" Quant sounded incredulous.

"I don't know," Jerome mumbled. "I don't know what happened. One minute I was here, the next I was in that woman's sitting room, trapped in a crystal ball." He wiped his forehead. "My God," he exclaimed, "this traveling lark isn't half dangerous. You don't know where you're going to end up."

"So you were trying something out?"

"No, I wasn't," Jerome said. "I wasn't trying to get anywhere, if that's what you mean. I was just thinking about things generally — you know, the friary, the people in it. Next thing, I was out of here and trapped like a genie in a bottle."

"You were thinking about Peter?"

Jerome thought back. "Yes. I remember now. I was thinking about how he used to go off on his motorbike. He wore black leather from head to foot. Fidelis used to say he looked satanic." He laughed at the memory.

"Ah, yes, Fidelis." Quant was silent and thoughtful for a moment, then he continued, "So, you were thinking about Peter?"

"Yes." Jerome clapped his hands and grinned. "Hey, how about that, then? I never knew Pete was into that fortune-telling stuff." He laughed. "I caught him out there. It's strictly against the rules, you know."

"I know it is," Quant said, his face lit with a smile.

Jerome laughed again. "Well, well, I wonder what else Pete gets up to in his spare time?"

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't wonder. Mind your own business." After a moment, though, the cat added, "Not that that's going to be particularly easy, from the look of things."

"How do you mean?"

"Well," said Quant reflectively, "we may have a little problem. We've got lift-off all right. You're off the launching pad and traveling. But, to put it frankly, you're a bit of an unguided missile."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It can't be helped. It happens sometimes."

"Does it?" Jerome asked with interest, but Quant did not elaborate.

"No matter. It's no problem. I'll be around."

"Keeping an eye on me, you mean? Rescuing me?"

"That sort of thing. You, or other people."

Jerome was not sure what Quant meant by this. "Well, thanks anyway," he said, "for getting me out of the crystal ball."

The cat waved a paw in a 'think nothing of it' kind of way.

"Mind you," Jerome said, "I wouldn't have minded staying a bit longer. It looked quite interesting."

"Quite," the cat remarked dryly. He added, "Nosy!"

Jerome ignored this. "I could have found out some quite interesting things."

"Precisely."

"Hey," Jerome exclaimed, "you came to fetch me back, didn't you? To take me away, I mean? I thought you'd come to rescue me."

"I did rescue you."

"Yes," Jerome conceded, "but you didn't want me listening in, did you?"

"Well, how would you like to have your crystal ball bugged?" Quant asked. "Anyway, it wouldn't have worked. She knew you were there."

"She did? She could see me?"

The cat nodded. "Yup."

"Good, is she? A good fortune-teller?" Jerome asked.

"Not bad at all," the cat replied. "She's one of the better ones."

"On the ball, is she?" Jerome laughed childishly at his own joke.

The cat groaned theatrically.

"Who is she?" asked Jerome.

"Mrs. Sibylla Smith."

"Have you known her long?" Jerome asked; he frowned as he decided the question sounded silly.

He thought the cat looked at him oddly before replying, "Long enough. She's been around for a while, one way and another."

Jerome had the feeling that he hadn't understood the cat's answer, but he let it pass. "Do you know all the fortune-tellers?"

"We know them. They don't always know us. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't."

Later Jerome was to wonder about the 'we.' "How did I get into the ball?" he enquired.

"Circumstances. Currents."

"How do you mean, currents?"

"There were two currents converging," Quant said.

Jerome looked at him questioningly, but the cat said, "Think about it."

Jerome thought, and said, "I was in one current, thinking about Peter. The fortune-teller was in another current, thinking about Peter. Because we were both thinking about him, the two currents — the two trains of thought — came together and I slipped into her world — or at least into her crystal ball. Is that right? Is that what happened?"

"Well done! You've got it, more or less."

"And it could happen again?"

"It could," the cat said. "You're quite susceptible from the look of things. Some people are — at first, anyway."

"You mean I'll be drawn into situations?" Jerome asked excitedly.

"You could be." The cat did not sound quite as thrilled at the prospect as Jerome did.

"If two currents are running together and I'm in one of them, I might, just might, slip into the other current, if the circumstances are right?"

"Yes," Quant agreed.

"Wow, how about that! Who knows where I might end up?"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"It's amazing, this death business, isn't it?" Jerome said. "I thought at first — when I first got here, I mean — that you just sort of... well, hung around, as it were. But now I can see that there are all sorts of things going on."

"There are all sorts of things going on, all right," Quant agreed, with a wry smile.

"When I was back on earth, I wondered sometimes if death might be the end, the end of everything. But it isn't — nothing like."

"It can be," Quant said.

"It can?"

"Sometimes. It all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Ah, now you're asking."

Jerome looked into the cat's glowing eyes and decided not to pursue this line of questioning. He had the feeling that his decision met with the cat's approval. A little embarrassed now, conscious that he was but a newcomer to this strange new world, he said awkwardly, "Well, thanks. Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome," the cat answered graciously. "I'll be seeing you." He disappeared.

Chapter Five

"How did you get on this morning?" Valentine asked, as he and Peter walked along the corridor after lunch.

"Not much to report, I'm afraid," Peter told him. "I drew a blank, actually."

Valentine looked at him in surprise. "I thought Sibylla was usually quite good."

"She is."

"Maybe she wasn't in a clairvoyant mood today," Valentine suggested. "Or perhaps she wasn't feeling too good. She must have her off days, like everyone else."

"Maybe. It's of no importance. I'll call round again when I'm next in town." Peter left Valentine and walked over to the side door. "I'll see you later." He opened the door and stepped outside.

As Valentine continued down the corridor, he was mildly surprised to see Peter heading towards the graveyard. Valentine went into the kitchen and saw Bernard at the sink and the cat bent over his bowl, finishing the remains of the meat pie they'd had for lunch. The cat raised his head to glance at him, then turned his attention back to his food bowl.

Bernard stepped aside from the sink to let Valentine fill up the kettle.

A few minutes later, he joined Valentine at the table and took the cup of coffee that was passed to him. He glanced toward the window. "I think I'll go for a walk this afternoon."

"Where are you going?" Valentine asked. "The quarry?"

Bernard stirred his coffee. "I was thinking of going down the old lane. I haven't been there for a while."

"Cowpat Lane? I haven't been down there myself lately. Would you mind if I joined you?"

"I'd be glad of the company," Bernard assured him.

Valentine drank his coffee, put his cup down and pushed back his chair. "I'll go and fetch my sketchbook."

Bernard slowly finished his coffee, washed his and Valentine's cups, put them to drain and went over to stroke the cat, who was sitting in a patch of sunlight washing his paws. The animal purred contentedly.

A few minutes later Bernard and Valentine left the friary and its outbuildings behind. They took the path to fields that in former times were grazed by cattle kept by the friars when they worked the farm. Cows and cowpats were long gone now but the old track retained its name. It was a favorite walk of those present-day friars who enjoyed a leisurely stroll in peaceful surroundings and a sit-down on the old wooden bench at the far end of the lane.

Valentine liked to take this particular route on his none-too-frequent walks. From the bench he could see the coastline spread out before him in an arc, with the mountain range behind it. He sometimes used the scene as a background for his cards and posters.

While Valentine sat on the bench and sketched, Bernard ambled through an open gate into one of the fields. He walked to the partially collapsed stone wall at the far side of the field, found a secure section to bear his weight, and sat down. He watched Valentine sketching on his bench for a few moments, then he looked to the curve of the bay. In the distance a large boat followed a smaller one across the horizon.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the scented country air. In the light, refreshing breeze his ears caught the bleat of sheep and the rustle of leaves on nearby oaks. His mind drifted, swirled and

absorbed itself into its surroundings, and for a few seconds Bernard once more ceased to exist as a separate entity.

Then the caw of a rook broke into his trancelike state and brought him back to consciousness. He looked at Valentine, saw that he was still sketching, and decided to walk to a little copse of trees in an adjoining field. Before he got there, however, his attention was caught by a colorful card lying in the grass at the foot of the wall. Glancing down at it, he saw that it appeared to be a postcard reproduction of a painting. Curious, he picked it up.

He found himself regarding the image of a young woman with long, gingery hair. She was wearing a blue dressing gown. It was the blue of this garment that had first caught his eye. Her sad face was turned towards the painter, but her sorrowing eyes were looking not at him, but at some far-off scene that only she could see. Bernard turned the card over and saw that the picture was called *Thoughts of the Past*. It was by an artist whose name was unfamiliar to him. Though the card was muddy and had been rained on at some point, he could make out a single-sentence message on the reverse. He read, "Memories of past times, John." The signature was a simply written "C." The space for the name and address was blank, so he presumed the writer had dropped and lost the card before having had time to fill in the rest of it. He turned it over to have another look at the picture. He saw that the woman was standing beside a window. Through the window could be seen sailing boats, the arches of a bridge, a broad expanse of river. It was a port scene.

"Quite a nice picture," he said to himself.

He was about to slip it into his pocket when a movement caught his eye, and he saw Valentine approaching across the field.

"Hi, I wondered where you'd got to," Valentine said as he drew near. "What's that you've got? What have you found? Is it something for your collection?"

Bernard held out the card for his friend's inspection.

"Spencer Stanhope," Valentine said, as soon as he saw the picture. He looked surprised. "Where did you find it?"

Bernard indicated the grass beneath the wall.

"I've always liked that picture," Valentine said. He, too, turned it over and read the handwritten message on the reverse. "I wonder what it's doing here? It's a funny place for it to be." He looked at Bernard. "Do you want it? Only, if you don't..."

Bernard waved an accommodating hand. "Please, keep it, if you'd like to."

"Thanks, I would." Valentine put it into his pocket. "Fancy finding it here. Someone must have dropped it. Not that many people come up here — apart from us, I mean. Hardly anyone knows about this little lane." He looked enquiringly at Bernard. "We don't know anyone called John, do we?"

Bernard shook his head. "Nope. It must have been a rambler."

Valentine drew the card out again, glanced once more at the illustration and reread the message on the back. "Well, it makes a change from the average postcard. Perhaps someone had been visiting an art gallery."

He and Bernard started back across the field.

As he walked slowly down the path between the graves, Peter read with interest, and a little nervily, the inscriptions on the headstones. Some of the graves dated back to the early nineteenth century, and many bore the old-fashioned names their occupants had chosen to adopt on entering the Order, names that were found but rarely these days: Fortunatus, Honoratus, Pius, Antoninus, Polycarp, Primitivus, Bernardine, Columbanus, Angelus, Innocent, Modestus.

He wondered how innocent Innocent had been and whether the Modestus who was buried with

him had been more modest during his lifetime than their own misnamed Modestus. He wondered, too, whether Kentigern and Edmund had been called Ken and Eddie in their time. Most of the recent headstones bore names of secular origin, since the friars were now permitted to retain their own names if they wished. Few bothered to select a new one on entering the Order.

He paused before some of the graves, said a little prayer, and recalled deceased friends — friends to whom he still chatted on his occasional strolls through the cemetery. *That's one thing about friends*, he'd often thought as he stood at their gravesides, *they're still your friends even after they've passed on*. How he knew this he wasn't quite sure, but he did know it, and had often sensed their presence beside him. On a few occasions, he had had the distinct impression of engaging in conversation with them. The fact that words, coming from beyond the grave, seemed to have gone straight into his mind, had never frightened him, for Peter had never believed death to be anything but a continuation of life in another form, a form in which identities were not lost, characters not much changed; a form, in short, not all that far removed from this one.

He moved slowly along the line of headstones. At the foot of Father Egbert's grave, he stopped again. He thought about the bad-tempered old friar who had died a few years earlier. Egbert had been one of the most erudite members of the Order, but not one of the most patient. He had always got on well with Egbert, though he knew others had found him sharp-tongued and unsympathetic. But he had respected the old man's learning and his devotion to his calling.

As he read the inscription above the priest's resting place, he felt pressure on his ankles and looked down to find the friary cat at his feet, nuzzling the hem of his habit. He bent to stroke him. "Hello, Leo," he said in a friendly manner. "Are you out for a stroll, like me?"

The cat meowed softly.

Peter straightened up, and as he looked again at the headstone he was startled to see it shimmer. It seemed to dissolve before his eyes, and with disbelief Peter saw that a robed figure now stood before him — or rather, hovered before him, for the figure was not quite at ground level. Fearfully, he raised his eyes.

He gasped as he recognized the face above the habit. "My God! Jerry!"

The late Brother Jerome stepped forward, still a few inches above the ground. "Oh, hi, Pete!" He sounded quite surprised himself. "I wasn't expecting to see you."

Peter stepped back hurriedly. "My God! You're Jerry's ghost!"

Jerome looked indignant. "I'm not. I'm me. It's me, Pete."

"But you're dead!" Peter said, shocked, for though he had never felt the dead were far away, he had not expected them to materialize before his eyes.

"Well, yes," Jerome conceded, then, after a brief reflection, added in a sharper tone, "I'm aware of that, thank you." He'd decided he really didn't need Peter to point out that fact.

Peter was wondering how to respond to this, when to his amazement the air above the grave shimmered again and a second robed figure appeared. Peter recognized the late Father Egbert.

"Eggy!" he said in amazement, adding, "*Et tu*," for he remembered Egbert's devotion to the classical languages, which Egbert had always refused to consider as dead. Now it was looking as if Egbert himself wasn't extinct, either.

Egbert acknowledged him briefly, then turned and glowered at Jerome.

Peter wasn't surprised to hear the old familiar voice rasping forth angrily from the spectral figure.

"Jerry! What do you think you're doing, careering all over the place, like this? You need fencing in. And stop hovering like that. It looks very hammy. There's no need to overdo it."

Peter watched and listened with interest, and no particular fear now, as Jerome looked apologetically

at his fellow... his fellow what? Peter wondered. Jerome did not seem to think he was a ghost, in which case Egbert wasn't a ghost, either.

Certainly Jerome's next words didn't sound particularly ghostly. "Sorry, Eggy," he said humbly. He looked down at his feet, then at the grave.

Peter watched Jerome's gaunt features tighten with concentration as he tried to land.

He failed. "Sorry, Eggy," he said again. "I can't get down."

"Well," Egbert said sharply, "you're getting everyone else down."

Peter grinned. Clearly, death hadn't robbed Egbert of his sharp tongue. But then, to his surprise, he heard the old man's tone soften.

"Well, I suppose you're new to it all," Egbert said sympathetically to Jerome. "You've not really got the hang of it yet. By the way," he added, "I saw you at the funeral the other day."

So, Egbert had been changed by death, Peter realized. It had mellowed him, at least to some extent. It was as if the old man, after a typically irascible start, was now making a determined effort to be pleasant to his fellow... his fellow what? Peter asked himself again, speculating about the exact status of the two figures before him.

As he regarded his late brothers in the faith, it occurred to him that, once over the initial shock, he was actually not all that surprised to see them, but he *was* quite surprised that they looked the same age as they had been when they had died. It was as if time had stopped for them. Egbert had been eighty-four at the time, and he looked eighty-four now. Time had fixed him at the moment of death.

He wondered if this was what happened to everyone and decided that it probably was, since Jerome, too, looked exactly the same as when he'd slipped to his death that icy day — though of course it had only been a matter of months since Jerome had died; he hadn't been gone long.

A thought flashed through his mind like a bolt of lightning. *Jerome hasn't been dead long.* At that moment he felt again a pressure against the hem of his habit, and he glanced down to find the cat nuzzling him. He wondered what Leo made of the ghosts, even supposing he saw them.

Peter looked back to Jerome, then, abruptly, down at the cat again. A shock like an electric current ran through him, as it dawned on him that it must have been Jerome and the friary cat that Sibylla had seen in her crystal. She had seen a thin, brown-haired, blue-eyed friar — a friar, she'd sensed, not long dead. Jerome was all of those things. In fact, he had the bluest eyes Peter had ever seen: they were bright, cornflower blue. It had been Jerome in the crystal ball, hadn't it? Peter wondered why he hadn't realized it at the time — the blue eyes should have been a clue. And the cat — the cat that had come to take Jerome away — it had been this cat Sibylla had seen, hadn't it?

Peter saw the animal's eyes were fixed on him, and that they glowed with an unsettling intensity. He recalled the beam of light Leo had directed on him earlier, on his return to the friary after his visit to Sibylla. He recalled, too, the sense of unease he had felt.

For the first time during this sepulchral episode he felt really frightened, and it wasn't his deceased brethren he feared, but the cat, as the realization seared into him that this was no ordinary cat. It was a supernatural creature.

Peter remembered that he had been quite surprised, in the weeks following Jerome's death, to find that the cat didn't seem to be pining for him, though it had been Jerome who had looked after him. Peter had expected the cat to be searching for Jerome, yet Leo had not appeared to miss him at all. Now Peter realized, with a fresh shock, that, in some way that he could not even begin to comprehend, the two had remained together after Jerome's death. Jerome and the cat were together in the spirit world, even though the cat also remained bodily in the friary. And an image sprang into his mind of Jerome, newly arrived in the spirit world, rushing about enthusiastically, with the cat in hot pursuit, and a choir of exasperated friars, longer-dead than he, urging him to stay put.

The fear the cat had inspired in Peter subsided to some extent as he envisioned this scenario with its comic potential. This mental picture of Jerome — who had always been a stay-at-home kind of chap in his lifetime, reluctant even to take a holiday — out of control in the afterworld, and dashing about here, there and everywhere, seemed to him not altogether fanciful when he saw Father Egbert turn towards the cat, wave a despairing hand in Jerome's direction and say pleadingly, "Do something about him, please."

Peter, realizing that in whatever hierarchy existed in the afterworld the cat far outranked the friar, looked down at Leo to see if he would escort Jerome off the scene. With fascination, and a growing sense of awe, he watched the cat stand up, stretch in a leisurely manner as if he had all the time in the world, step forward, jump daintily over the coping stone and join the two friars on the grave; Jerome was still hovering slightly above it, not having managed to come down to earth. The cat turned to glance at Peter — slightly archly, to Peter's mind — then looked at Egbert, then at Jerome, then held out a paw, and all three vanished.

Peter found himself staring at an empty space. The grave was deserted. A moment earlier, it had been quite crowded. Now Egbert, Jerome and the cat had disappeared.

Peter looked around him, wondering if they might have moved to another part of the cemetery, but saw no sign of them. They had gone. He looked at Egbert's grave. He even leaned forward and listened, but all he heard was the sound of the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees and of a car passing along the nearby road.

Feeling quite trembly, he walked round to the other end of the grave and gripped the headstone. He braced his knees and took several deep breaths. The disappearance of the three had shocked him more than the appearance of the two had done.

Okay, so two ghosts had come and gone. Well, ghosts did that, didn't they? They appeared; they disappeared. That was what ghosts did — they were known for it. It was unsettling for spectators, of course, but it was something one could live with.

Yet... it wasn't as if Jerome and Egbert had looked, well, ghostly. They hadn't. They hadn't looked at all wraithlike. They hadn't even looked particularly dead. Dead, they were much the same as they had been when they'd been alive. Dead? Alive?

Peter shuddered. Disappearing ghosts were one thing. A disappearing flesh-and-blood cat, vanishing before his eyes, was something else again. And the cat *was* flesh-and-blood — he knew that. This was the friary cat, whose fur he stroked, who purred with pleasure and padded along companionably with the friars as they made their way to the church or chapel. This was the cat who ate tidbits slipped to him when the guardian wasn't looking. This was a living cat, all right: a real, live cat. But he had disappeared into thin air.

Despite the warmth of the day, Peter felt icy cold. Was the cat alive? How could Leo be alive when he had just gone off with two ghosts to their world? Peter held more tightly onto the headstone. Was Leo dead then, like them? Could he be both dead and alive at the same time? *What sort of creature is this? What world have I got into?*

The recollection of Sibylla staring into her crystal ball came to him, and guilt added itself to his fear. It was his own fault, wasn't it? He shouldn't have gone meddling in things that didn't concern him. He had got himself mixed up with the occult.

Oh, God! What awful thing might he see next? What ghastly scenes might unfold before him? Peter groaned audibly. Why hadn't he stuck to his own world, instead of trying to tune into some other? No wonder they were forbidden from consulting clairvoyants. Why hadn't he realized there might be a good reason for it? He'd thought it was just a bit of innocent fun, asking Sibylla to look into her crystal ball. But it wasn't. That crystal ball was the gateway to all sorts of weird things. He should have stuck

to prayers and contemplation and left clairvoyance alone. He should never have got involved.

It was his own fault. He had only himself to blame. *Mea culpa. My fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault.* He would never go back to see Sibylla again. He was finished with all that. He'd go to the chapel now, confess his sin and do penance.

Peter let go of the headstone, straightened his back, breathed deeply and tried to settle his mind. When he felt calmer, he walked past the grave. He glanced at it nervously and quickened his pace. Then a thoughtful expression came over his face and he halted. He stared at the grave, then closed his eyes and tried to recapture the scene he had seen enacted there.

It occurred to him that he had been watching a theatrical act staged on a grave, with himself as the audience. He had been watching a show. And the star of the show had been the cat, no doubt about it. The cat had been the star turn, and knew it. Peter shivered. The supporting cast knew it, too. Whatever powers Egbert and Jerome might now possess, the cat possessed a far greater power. Egbert had acknowledged as much.

Though Peter was breathing more easily now, more evenly, more confidently, he felt a stab of fear. The cat was a magical creature. He had to be! How else could he live in the friary and yet go home with ghosts? This cat lived in two worlds: he went from one to another and belonged in each. Egbert and Jerome didn't belong here anymore — they'd only been visiting — but the cat did. Leo lived here as an earthly cat. He also lived there — wherever and whatever *there* was — and belonged there.

Unsteadily, Peter moved to an adjoining grave and leaned against the tall marble angel adorning it. With trembling hands, he caressed the outstretched wings. He felt feverish, and the cold stone beneath his touch came as cooling relief.

As his fingers slid over the carved feathers, he wondered if the cat might be some kind of angel. There were all sorts of angels. Maybe they had one in their midst and didn't know it. If Leo wasn't an angel, what was he? Peter felt a twinge of panic. What sort of being did they have among them?

Should he tell anyone about Leo? What could he tell them? People would just laugh if he told them they had a supernatural cat. They'd think he was out of his mind. Perhaps he was.

A sudden access of hilarity hit him and he laughed out loud. Then he was conscious once more of the marble beneath his touch, remembered he was in a graveyard and sobered up. He looked around cautiously, afraid that someone might have seen him. To his relief, he saw that he was still alone. He wondered why he had laughed. It wasn't as if he had anything to laugh about. Ghosts and a magic cat weren't a laughing matter. What was happening? What weird fantasy world had he gotten himself into? After checking briefly that he was still alone, Peter put his arms around the stone angel and hugged it tightly, as if trying to embrace cold reality.

He gave a final glance around the deserted cemetery, then set off for the friary. As he passed the grave in which Jerome had been laid to rest, he looked at it suspiciously, but, still feeling unnerved, did not stop. He remembered hearing Egbert say to Jerome that he had seen him at the funeral the other day, and wondered whose funeral it might have been, then realized that it must have been Angus's.

My God, he thought, they come back for the funerals!

Though his legs had gone wobbly, he forced himself to hurry out of the cemetery. He wanted to get back into the familiar world of the friary and away from the terra incognita inhabited by ghosts and mysterious cats of unfathomable powers.

Noticing that the front door was open, he made for it, anxious to be back in the building. As he entered the porch, he glanced at the wooden benches that lined it on each side. He nearly collapsed when he saw a familiar furry figure sitting quietly on one, washing its paws.

"You're back!" he gasped. His heart pounded, his legs gave way and he sank down on the bench beside the cat.

Quant looked up at him innocently and meowed encouragingly.

Peter put out a trembling hand and ran it along the cat's back. The fur felt soft and smooth, just as a living cat's fur should feel. Under the fur he felt the ridges of the backbone. He put his hand beneath the cat's chest and felt the heartbeat. He caressed the furry back again. As he stroked, the cat began to purr. As the purring grew louder, Peter felt his nerves becoming soothed. "Well, Leo," he said quietly, "you're real enough, aren't you?"

The cat gave a little meow, then resumed his purring.

After a few minutes, Peter felt so relaxed that he was on the point of dropping off to sleep. He leaned drowsily against the wall and closed his eyes. The sound of a telephone ringing, then of footsteps hurrying along the corridor leading to the front door, made him open his eyes again. He looked up as a figure came into the porch.

Brother Bernard walked past him and peered down the path.

"Have you seen Fidelis?" he asked Peter.

Peter shook his head.

"There's a message for him," Bernard said, "from that woman at Hillside Cottage. She wants him to ring her back as soon as possible. It's the third time she's rung." He was about to go back into the corridor when he stopped and looked curiously at Peter. "Are you all right?"

Peter nodded. "I'm fine."

Bernard's eyes moved from Peter to the cat, then to Peter, then — questioningly, it seemed to Peter — back to the cat, who regarded him steadily. For a moment Bernard lingered in the porch, as if uncertain whether to say anything more, then he patted the cat's head, glanced at Peter and went into the friary.

Peter and the cat remained in the porch for several minutes, then the cat jumped nimbly to the ground and followed Bernard inside. Peter saw him padding in the direction of the kitchen, from which wafted the smell of baking.

At teatime, Peter handed round the Victoria sponge. He looked round the table, saw that Fidelis was missing, and asked Bernard if he had managed to find him.

Bernard nodded. "He drove off as soon as he got the message. He hasn't been back."

"What's that about a message?" Oliver asked.

"Someone wanted to talk to Fidelis," Bernard said.

"Who?" Oliver asked.

"The woman at Hillside Cottage," Bernard told him.

Oliver raised a quizzical eyebrow but asked no further questions.

After tea, Peter helped Bernard to load the plates onto the trolley and accompanied him to the kitchen. They found Ignatius cutting up a piece of cake left over from a trifle he had made. He put the cake into the cat's bowl and spooned some cold custard over it.

The cat appeared in the doorway, twitched his nose, and trotted over to his bowl. He began to eat with evident enjoyment.

"You want to mind Fidelis doesn't catch you at that!" Bernard told Ignatius with a smile.

"The cat's got to be fed," Ignatius said. "Just because Fidelis doesn't like cats... er..." His voice tailed off as his guardian appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Fidelis doesn't like cats," Fidelis confirmed. "And he doesn't see why, if we've got to have a cat — and personally, he doesn't see why we have to have a cat — it can't feed itself off the mice running round the place. God knows we're got enough vermin. Anyway, that animal's vicious. It scratched me once. It's hardly what you'd call a pet." With a disapproving look at Quant, who hadn't even looked up from his bowl, he walked heavily across the kitchen.

As he went into the corridor, Peter and Bernard, who had been watching the cat throughout this verbal assault, saw the animal lift his head and direct an unfriendly stare at their guardian's back.

"Well," Bernard remarked, "there's not much love lost there, on either side."

Ignatius walked quietly over to the door and peered cautiously down the corridor. "I can't see what he's got against Leo," he said softly. "Leo's a nice cat. He's no trouble at all. It's good to have a cat around. I like cats. And I like this cat."

Peter had been aware that Bernard was watching him. Now he heard him say, almost tentatively, "Jerome liked this cat."

He looked into the brother's searching brown eyes and read questions. With a glance at Ignatius, who was busy at the sink, washing the dishes, he nodded and agreed, "He did like Leo, didn't he?"

He had questions of his own that he wanted answering, but now wasn't the time to ask them.

Chapter Six

Jerome felt slightly winded when he re-emerged into the afterworld, for it had been a fast journey. He had not noticed either Quant or Egbert leave him on the way back, but he had arrived alone. Looking around in vain for his two companions, he presumed that Quant had already returned to the friary. Quant's comings and goings no longer surprised him. Nothing about Quant surprised him.

Egbert's absence surprised him, though, for it had not occurred to him that Egbert would do anything other than accompany him, especially after his harsh words. He'd have thought the grumpy old friar would have stayed, if only to make sure that he made it back, since he seemed to view him as something of a loose cannon out of control.

Jerome thought this was unfair. He was doing his best. It wasn't easy being dead. He could hardly be blamed. It had been through no fault of his own that he had found himself peering out of someone's crystal ball, or touching down on someone else's grave — or, in his case, not touching down, and hovering spectrally above it. It hadn't been fair of Egbert to criticize him for a hammy performance. He hadn't meant to float in the air like that. He hadn't meant to be back on earth at all.

One moment, he'd been pottering around in the afterworld, doing nothing in particular, not even *thinking* about anything in particular; the next moment, he'd found himself in the friary cemetery, feeling as if he'd been grabbed by some unseen force and dragged through a hedge backwards.

Jerome closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down. He'd thought at first that the afterworld was, well, to put it frankly and taking all things into consideration, a pretty boring place. But since Quant had introduced him to the idea of inter-world travel, things had got hectic, a bit too hectic, really. Quant was a seasoned traveler. Egbert, Aloysius and the other friars seemed to know the ropes, too. But he didn't yet. It was all strange and new, and he hadn't yet got the hang of things.

There were some curious goings-on. Journeys happened that he hadn't been intending to take. Even when he did try to take a trip somewhere, he found himself getting stuck halfway. It was all very well for Quant to tell him how to do it. There was a world of difference between knowing in theory how to do something — travel between worlds, say — and actually doing it on your own. It was like being told how to swim, then being thrown in at the deep end of the swimming pool and left there without a pool attendant on hand. No wonder he'd ended up getting stuck. And a fat lot of sympathy he'd had from Quant, with his joke about tree nymphs. As if there were such things!

He wondered if the other friars had experienced difficulties to begin with. After all, they'd all been new to it once. It must have taken them time to settle down and get sorted out. *Mind you*, he thought, *unexpected journeys could turn out to be quite interesting. You might find out all sorts of surprising things.* He'd really caught Peter out, hadn't he? Who'd have thought of him being into fortune-telling? It was strictly against the rules. A sly smile of pleasurable anticipation lit Jerome's cadaverous features. Who knew what other situations he might inadvertently intrude on? Not that he'd be allowed to intrude for long, if the episode with the crystal ball was anything to go by: Quant would soon be along to escort him off the scene. Quant had been a bit of a spoilsport there, a bit of a censor. Jerome resolved have a word with him about that, the next time he saw him.

He looked round to see if the cat might have reappeared, but there was no sign of him. He looked for Egbert, but could only assume he had taken a diversion somewhere en route. He wondered where Egbert hung out in the afterworld, for he hadn't seen him around.

So far he had only seen Aloysius, and he was pretty sure that had been because Aloysius, embarrassed by his lethal headstone, had sought him out. Jerome was quite impressed by that. *Not*

everyone, he thought, would have had the decency to come and say sorry — not when they didn't have to. So, full marks to him.

But in coming to say sorry, Aloysius had obviously seen the drama unfold. Aloysius and who else? Jerome pictured an audience of friars watching his death being enacted like a stage drama. He was certain from what Egbert had said that they had all seen it. So where were they? He looked around again for his brethren-in-spirit, convinced that they were close by, if only he could spot them.

Jerome was almost certain now that he remained as much a member of his community as he had been on earth, and that he was still in his Order. Death hadn't taken him from it. It had merely transferred his membership to the beyond-the-grave branch. It was the same community, as far as he could see: the same people wearing the same habits, showing the same traits of character, if Aloysius and Egbert were anything to go by. Aloysius had always been a friendly, gentle, sympathetic soul, anxious to do right by everyone; Egbert had been a bad-tempered old cuss, always exasperated about something. Jerome felt comforted in a way, knowing that Egbert in death was much the same as Egbert in life. It implied that when he finally managed to locate his community he would find things much as before. There would be far more friars, of course, the dead in his Order far outnumbering the living.

Again he looked around, feeling that he might be in a crowd, if only he could see it. It occurred to him that a horse in blinkers might experience something of the same sensation, knowing that things were going on around him, out of his field of vision. *I've got to get the blinkers off. There are people here and I can't see them. How can I see them?*

The answer suddenly came to him. *Why, by looking for them, of course. Quant told me it's a matter of looking. Looking at a thing displaces the particles it's made of. Displace the particles and you can go through them. Concentrate on something, think of a gate, make a gate and go through it.*

It occurred to Jerome that all this thinking about gates might be something newcomers did: lesson one in particle displacement for beginners. He felt sure that Quant didn't need to work at visualizing gates. Maybe Egbert and Aloysius didn't now. But that was by the way. If making gates was what beginners had to do, well, he was a beginner and he needed all the help he could get in this surprising new world. If he needed to think gates, he'd think gates.

But hang on, Jerome thought, gates, gateways, are for going places. I don't want to go anywhere, not at the moment. I want to stay right here. And I want to see what's here.

Again, he looked around. *I need something to see through, not something to go through. I need... I need... some spectacles! It's lenses I need, not a gate!*

He reflected for a moment. *It must be the same technique. If I want to go somewhere, I have to find something to focus on. Then I focus on it, think gates, and go through. So, as I want to see, I need to focus on something, think spectacles, and then I'll be able to see. Hang on, there's a catch in this. I want to see what's around me. I don't know what's around me — that's the whole point. So what do I focus on, since I don't know what's here? I haven't a clue what's here.*

He sucked his lip thoughtfully. He frowned. Then his expression brightened. *I do know what's here. Or rather, I don't know what's here but I know who's here. Egbert's here and Aloysius is here. They're here somewhere. He grinned. I know! I'll make a spectacle of Egbert!*

After a brief visualization of the temperamental old friar, however, he thought better of it, and conjured up instead the memory of the mild-featured, good-humored Aloysius. Once he had fixed this more kindly brother-in-spirit in his mind's eye, he conjured up a pair of dark-framed spectacles and looked through them at his image of Aloysius. His fists were clenched and his face was screwed up with the effort of his concentration, for he was determined not to let Aloysius slip away.

Suddenly the image in his mind's eye shimmered, and he had the impression of being in a dense cloud. The cloud dissolved around him, he was momentarily dazzled by bright light, then he found

Aloysius standing before him, smiling. Jerome stared at him, scarcely daring to believe that his attempt had succeeded.

At last, convinced that Aloysius really was there and wasn't just a figment of an over-anxious imagination, Jerome laughed with joy. "I've done it! I've found you!"

Aloysius, still smiling, moved towards him, his hand outstretched. Jerome noticed again how firm his hand felt, and the thought slipped through his mind that spirits — he toyed for a fraction of an instant with the word 'ghosts' — were only insubstantial as visitors back on earth. In their own world they were, seemingly, flesh-and-blood again. He wondered if that was what was meant by the resurrection of the body.

It occurred to him that Quant, superior as ever, transformed himself into flesh-and-blood in whatever world he was in. A meow caught his ear, and Jerome, startled, looked past Aloysius to see a ginger cat jump nimbly down from a robed lap he had been perched on, and walk daintily towards him. Jerome looked up to see whom the lap belonged to, and found himself staring into the welcoming face of his former spiritual adviser, Father Michael Murphy, whom he had said farewell to many years ago.

"Good to see you, Jerry," Michael said. "Well done!" he added, standing up, straightening his habit and brushing cat hairs off it.

Jerome saw to the left of Aloysius a group of friars sitting together. They stood up and applauded. Then they went up to him and each of them in turn shook his hand warmly. "Welcome, Jerry. Welcome home."

As Jerome looked into each remembered smiling face, he felt quite overcome with emotion and his legs went trembly. Aloysius, attentive as ever, took his arm. "Come and sit down, Jerry. It's been a bit of a shock for you."

"A bit?" Jerome said weakly. "It's all quite amazing!" He sank down on the chair that Aloysius pulled up for him. The other friars grouped themselves about him. Jerome looked at them. "I can't believe it!" A ball of ginger fur landed lightly in his lap. Jerome laughed, and patted the cat's head. "I might have known you'd be here, Quant."

The cat purred and said, "Well done. Good effort."

"Clever bit of deduction, Jerry," Michael said.

Jerome thought about this. "You were watching me," he said, a trifle accusingly. Then the full significance of Michael's words struck him. "You were reading my mind."

One or two friars shuffled their feet, and Aloysius said, in an embarrassed, apologetic tone, "Well, er..."

Jerome looked annoyed, then he remembered what his thoughts had been and looked about him nervously.

"It's all right," the cat said. "Egbert's not here. He's... gone for a walk."

"Yes," Aloysius said quickly. "He's gone for a walk. He'll be back soon." He patted Jerome on the arm. "We weren't, er, spying on you, you know. You mustn't think that. We were just keeping an eye on you, a brotherly eye." He was backed up by a chorus of fraternal agreement.

Jerome looked suspiciously at his brethren, but saw only expressions of solicitude on their faces. He decided it was no time to pick a quarrel. "Well, thanks. It's great to see you again. I'll be meeting up with everyone, I suppose. You're obviously all here somewhere." His gaze ranged from the circle of friars to the row of pillars behind them and the lawn and meadow beyond. He noticed a wood on the far side of the meadow. "Er, everyone is here, I take it?"

He felt, rather than heard, the cat on his lap laugh quietly. The friars said nothing. Jerome looked again into their faces, but now they appeared blank.

There's something going on, something I don't know about. They know about it. But whatever it is, they're not telling me — not yet, anyway.

Then Michael said jovially, "Yes, everyone's here. Your old friends are here, close at hand."

This time, Jerome heard the cat laugh. He looked again into the friars' faces. They were still expressionless. "Well, it's great to see you," he said again, stroking the cat. "I only wish I'd got through to you sooner. I found it a bit lonely on my own."

He heard Quant murmur something that sounded like, "Well, it wouldn't be the first time." But he thought he must have misheard him.

He turned to his fellow friars. "Um, only asking, but why, since you knew I wanted to find you, didn't you come to fetch me? You could have done, presumably." He looked at Aloysius. "You could have brought me back with you when you came to see me that time."

As Aloysius began to apologize afresh for his deadly headstone, Michael said, "It wouldn't have been a good idea to bring you here. It was better to let you find your own way."

"Why?" asked Jerome.

"Well, not everyone wants to come here," Michael said.

Jerome looked surprised. "Don't they?"

"Some don't. And those that don't wouldn't thank you for whisking them here."

"Oh." Jerome sounded baffled. "What sort of people wouldn't want to come here?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "It all depends. There are different sorts. Sometimes people from big families or who've been living in big cities want peace and quiet when they die — people who've felt crowded in their lifetime and want to be on their own for a while."

Jerome seized on this point. "So they may change their mind later on?"

Michael nodded. "They may, they may not. Some people prefer their own company. They just don't want to join anyone."

"I got fed up being on my own," Jerome said. "It's all right for a while, then it gets a bit, well, boring." He had the curious impression that he heard the cat sniggering quietly to himself, but thought again that he must be mistaken. "I suppose hermits, and people like that, would want to stay on their own. People like the Desert Fathers, for instance. They liked solitude. They wouldn't be wanting company."

Michael smiled. "Oh, even desert fathers can get a bit cheesed off with being on their own. It can get lonely in the desert... miles of sand, the odd cave and not much else. Even a desert father may welcome a friendly face at times."

The cat laughed out loud. Jerome, still stroking him, felt the fur ripple beneath his touch. The animal seemed to find something amusing about the conversation, but Jerome was baffled as to what it might be. "What's so funny, Quant?" he asked.

The cat said nothing but looked up into Jerome's enquiring face. His green eyes sparkled, then turned golden.

As he stared into their depths, Jerome felt giddy, disorientated, and had the impression of being in the kind of desert scene that Michael had just described. Then his senses stabilized once more and he found himself back among his fellow friars, caressing the small ginger cat on his lap. "How odd! I seemed to be somewhere else for a moment. It must have been an effect of the light here."

He glanced to the outside of the building, to see where the light was coming from, but found no obvious source. When he looked back into the room, he noticed that his brethren were watching him. One or two were smiling.

There's something here I've not cottoned on to. Not yet, anyway.

No one said anything, however, and he looked down at the cat. He ran his fingers over the creature's

silken back. "Well," he said lightly, "there's no need for anyone to be lonely when they've got a pet like this."

The fur beneath his hands trembled, and he had the distinct impression that Quant was trying not to laugh. He also thought that Michael seemed to be suppressing a smile.

"Well," he continued, after a moment, "it's all very interesting here."

"Oh, it is," Michael assured him.

There were murmurs of agreement from the other friars.

Quant shifted his position on Jerome's knees, yawned, and stood up unsteadily. He wobbled a bit, stretched a bit, kneaded the coarse cloth of Jerome's habit with his front paws, then jumped down. From the ground, he looked up at the friar, and Jerome saw a scintilla of rich gold sparkle in his eyes.

"I'll be seeing you," Quant said and vanished.

"That cat certainly gets about," Jerome commented admiringly as he, too, picked ginger hairs from his habit. "I suppose he's already back in the friary."

He stood up and looked about him. He was in a large, honey-colored room. On the far side, a row of creamy stone pillars led onto a terrace that was bounded by a balustrade of the same pale stone. Beyond the terrace lay the lawn, the meadow, and the wood he had seen earlier. Or was it a forest?

"Hey," he said excitedly, "it's really nice here, much nicer than where I was before. Er, where is *here* exactly? Is it far from where I was before?"

"No," came a chorused reply from the friars.

"Stop thinking distances," Michael advised. "Distances don't exist here — not as you're remembering them, anyway."

"Is it more like layers?"

The friars nodded.

"You mean, like mille-feuille?" Jerome made horizontal slicing movements.

His fellow friars looked at him uncertainly.

He tried again and formed his hands into a circle. "Or an onion? Different layers all curled around each other, centering round a core?"

"The latter, I think," said Michael slowly. "Yes, the onion, with the core."

"Of course," Jerome said, "with our Lord as the core."

In the silence that followed he looked with puzzlement into the faces regarding him. There was an expression on them that he couldn't quite read.

"Our Lord is at the core," Michael said, eventually. "Of course He is, no question about it. But there are many layers, many different layers."

"You mean, in my Father's house there are many mansions, sort of thing?"

"Yes." Michael did not seem inclined to elaborate, and Jerome decided against pursuing the matter just then.

"So," Aloysius said, "I take it you'll be staying here? You've no plans to return to where you were before?"

Jerome looked at him in surprise, as if he thought the question hardly needed asking. "Of course I want to stay here. I don't want to go back to being on my own. It was boring, on my own." With pleading in his voice, he added, "I want to be with you. I can, can't I? I can stay here?"

"Of course you can," Aloysius assured him.

Jerome, relieved, beamed at his fellow friars. "It's really nice being here with you. I'm glad I managed to find you."

Murmurs from his brethren indicated that they were glad he had found them.

Jerome looked with pleasure into the friendly faces. Then he glanced past the friars to the view

beyond the pillars and the terrace, and noticed that the meadow beyond the lawn was dotted with flowers. "It's lovely here," he said. "It's really interesting. I'm sure there are all sorts of things to see."

"Oh, there are," Michael said, with, it seemed to Jerome, a rather thin smile.

"Do many people," Jerome asked, "decide, once they've got here, that they don't want to stay, that they'd rather be on their own?"

"Not many. A few decide it's not really for them. They have a bit of a look round, find it's not really their scene, and choose to go back, as it were. They decide they'd rather be on their own, after all."

"They go back and meditate, contemplate the infinite, things like that?" Jerome said.

"Things like our Lord," Michael said sharply.

"Of course," Jerome agreed hastily. "That's what I meant." After a moment he ventured, "Perhaps they'd been expecting to find something a bit more, well, traditional when they got here. You know, harps, heavenly choirs, seraphs flying round with hot coals, that sort of thing."

Michael gave Jerome a withering look that implied that Jerome wouldn't recognize a seraph if one dropped a hot coal onto his toe. He seemed to be about to say something, then appeared to change his mind. There was a slightly uncomfortable silence, which was broken by Aloysius saying to Jerome, "You're welcome to stay. Of course you are."

"Sure," Michael said, with obvious warmth now. "We'd like you to stay." He smiled and added, "It'll suit you better here. You were never, if I remember rightly, really into meditating."

"I never got the hang of it," Jerome confessed. "I always got distracted. I don't think I was really cut out for it."

"Some people aren't," Aloysius said, patting his arm sympathetically. "Some are, some aren't."

"Well," Jerome said, "I think it's lovely here. I'm really glad I can stay. I can go for walks, meet people, see things." He noticed Aloysius and Michael exchange a glance, but neither spoke. "I'll have a walk in that field over there. There are some nice flowers in it." He waved an arm expansively in the direction of the trees beyond. "And I can have a look around that wood. I've always liked woods. Woods are full of interesting things."

He saw an expression of something like embarrassment flit across Aloysius's face. He glanced at Michael and saw him give Aloysius a warning shake of his head. Surprised, he looked at the other friars, but they seemed to be finding the floor quite interesting just at that moment. *There's something they don't want to talk about. It's something to do with the wood, I think — or the trees.*

Then the memory of his temporary incarceration in an oak tree came back to him, and he wondered if his brethren might be recalling the same incident and trying to hide their mirth.

"Mind you," he added, "trees can be a right bugger at times — oaks in particular, in my experience. I'm right off oaks at the moment." He expected his fellow friars to laugh, or at least to smile, but to his surprise they didn't. Wondering if they had forgotten the episode, he reminded them, "You remember me getting stuck in that damn tree? And Quant making that joke about tree nymphs?"

He saw on their faces an expression he could not interpret, though he thought it hinted at something, as if his brothers were trying to convey a message to him. But what the message was, he couldn't tell, and they seemed not to want to say it out loud. In the face of their apparent reticence, and still feeling unsure of himself in this strange new world, he felt inhibited from questioning them. He stood before them uneasily.

Perhaps Father Cassian Connor, a friend to Jerome in his first days in the Order, sensed his discomfort, for he said cheerily, "You're not the first one to have been stuck in mid-flight, you know, Jerry. Ben got trapped in the font once — during a baptism."

Everyone laughed unreservedly now.

"He was in a right pickle," Cassian went on. "He was stuck fast, and he didn't dare holler out in

case anyone heard him and dropped the baby." He grinned. "He was in a right sweat when he finally made it back here."

"How did he get out of the font?" Jerome asked, then quickly added, "No, don't tell me. Quant got him out, didn't he?"

Cassian nodded and smiled. "He made him wait until the end of the baptism, though. He said it was out of respect for the occasion."

"I think that cat gets a kick out of letting people stew for a while," Jerome remarked.

"Ben wouldn't go back for ages after that," Michael said. "He lost his nerve — he was frightened of getting stuck again. He didn't go back till Max's funeral. We all went together for that, I think." He glanced around. "Didn't we, chaps?"

The other friars nodded.

"I never thought you were all there, too," Jerome said. "It's amazing! Where is Max, by the way?"

Aloysius gestured vaguely into the distance. "He's just out for a while. He'll be back soon."

"I'd like to see Max again, and Ben." Jerome gazed around the room. "Where did you say Egbert was?"

"He's gone for a walk," Aloysius told him. "He'll be back soon."

Jerome asked, "Do you often go back to the friary?"

Cassian nodded. "Yes, quite often."

"And no one there ever sees you?"

Aloysius said, "I wouldn't say that. One or two of the friars spot us sometimes when they're meditating — we can see them staring at us — but they're never quite sure whether it's really us."

"They think they might be imagining things?"

Aloysius nodded.

"You never talk to them, tell them it is really you?"

"No, it's best not to," Michael said.

"Well, Bernard and Peter saw me, and talked to me," Jerome remarked.

"Yes," Michael agreed. "That was unusual. Quant arranged it, of course. Maybe he thinks you're going to need a helping hand." He evidently noticed the hurt look that crossed Jerome's face, for he swiftly added, "Just to help get you started, of course." He gave Jerome what the latter thought was a rather sly look. "He's very attached to you, you know."

"Well, we've always got on well together."

"Always," agreed Michael.

"Well," Jerome said, "perhaps I could have a look round now?" He looked at Aloysius, expecting him to offer to accompany him.

"Er, fine, okay," Aloysius said, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice and he made no effort to move. "Or would you like a trip back to the friary?"

Jerome, remembering his previous visit, looked doubtful.

"I'll come with you," Aloysius told him. "Come on. You'd like to go back, wouldn't you?"

"Well... oh, all right," Jerome agreed reluctantly. But as Aloysius moved towards him to take his arm, he turned and gazed out at the meadow. "Shouldn't I have a look round here first, though?"

He had the impression that Michael and Aloysius fleetingly exchanged glances.

"Sure, if you want to," Michael said.

But Jerome noticed that he, too, stayed put. "Is there any problem?"

"None at all," Michael assured him hastily. "Of course not. There's no problem. But there's no need to rush things. You've only just got here. Get yourself acclimatized before getting out and about."

"I feel fine."

"I'm sure you do," Michael said. "But it's been a big shock to your system, all the same. You're through to another layer, Jerry. It's a whole new world here."

Jerome heard Cassian mutter something that sounded like, "Shouldn't that be 'old' world?"

But he didn't have time to question him, for Michael continued quickly, "Get yourself used to being here first. Have a look round later on. Nothing here is going to go away." He gave Cassian a sidelong glance. "Take my advice, Jerry. Don't rush things. You don't want to dash off exploring as soon as you've got here."

"Don't I?"

"No, you don't," Michael told him firmly. "You want to get yourself settled in first. Potter round here for a while." He indicated the room and the terrace. "Or," he turned towards Aloysius, "take that trip back to the friary with Al. You want to keep in touch with the old place, don't you? There's no need for you to worry about the journey. Al will be with you. He'll make sure you get there and back. He'll stay with you." He smiled persuasively at Jerome. "You'll have a return ticket. That's a promise!"

Aloysius got up and said to Jerome, with unexpected decisiveness, "Come on, Jerry. It'll be a good thing for you to get used to the journey. You'll probably want to go to the friary quite often, won't you?"

Jerome looked at him suspiciously, feeling that he was being so keenly encouraged to revisit his former home only because his brethren, for reasons he could not guess, didn't want him exploring his new home yet. *Oh well, go with the flow. There'll be plenty of time for looking round later on. Do what they want, just for now.*

Obediently, he said, "Sure! Of course I'd like to see the old place again. Thanks, Al." It would be nice to return to the friary, anyway, and see who was about, see what was going on. Then later, when he was back here, well, he'd take a little stroll on his own.

Chapter Seven

“Right,” Aloysius said, “where do you want to aim for?”

Jerome thought for a moment. “How about the guardian’s room? That’s fairly central.”

Aloysius smiled. “Okay. Why not?” He beckoned to Jerome to come closer, then laid his hand lightly on his arm. “Ready?”

Jerome swallowed and nodded.

“Right, let’s go,” Aloysius said.

Jerome felt the sensation of rushing along, and then he was in Fidelis’s room standing beside Aloysius by the open window. Fidelis was not in the room, but it was not unoccupied. Seated at the guardian’s table was Oliver, the bursar, with a large basket full of coins. Jerome watched him tip the coins onto the table and sort them into small heaps.

“Olly’s up to his old tricks,” Jerome whispered to Aloysius.

Aloysius shrugged but made no comment. It was well known in the friary that the bursar, who emptied the collection boxes placed at the back of the church to raise funds for various good causes, put the offerings into one big basket and divided the contents equally. Jerome had asked him one day why he didn’t keep the offerings separate, as parishioners clearly chose to put their coins into one box rather than another, but Oliver had said, “It’s all for furthering our Lord’s work, isn’t it?” Jerome had had to agree, though he had continued to feel doubtful about the practice, all the same. However, as a humble brother, who was he to argue with an ordained priest?

He and Aloysius watched Oliver for a few moments, then Aloysius led the way towards the door, which Jerome noticed was closed. Despite this, he followed Aloysius into the corridor. Having felt no impact, he looked back but saw that the door was still closed. He glanced at Aloysius, but the priest gave no appearance of finding anything unusual in slipping through a closed door, so he said nothing and continued after him down the corridor.

As they rounded the corner towards the kitchen, a small ginger cat appeared, walking towards them. Aloysius bent to stroke the animal. “Hi, Quant! Fancy meeting you here!”

Jerome saw the cat give his enigmatic feline smile. He, too, bent to stroke him. As he felt the smooth fur pass beneath his fingers, he wondered again at the cat’s ability to materialize in whichever world he was in. He also wondered why he, an insubstantial visitor to earth, should be able to feel the cat’s silky fur, but he did not wonder about it for long, for he accepted Quant as a mystery beyond his understanding.

After a moment, the cat disengaged himself, meowed and padded off towards the cloisters. Aloysius and Jerome continued down the corridor, and as they passed the room that served as the parish office, the door opened and Fidelis ushered out a smartly dressed young couple. The two spirits watched him lead them to the front door and shake hands with them, and heard him wish them all the best for their forthcoming wedding.

Jerome said, “Oh, so that’s why Oliver was in Fidelis’s room, counting out the money. Fidelis had taken over his office. I wonder when the wedding is? I didn’t know the couple, did you?”

Aloysius shook his head. “I’ve never seen them before. Maybe they don’t live in the parish.” As the front door closed behind the visitors, he turned to Jerome. “Well, where would you like to go next?”

“How about the kitchen?” Jerome suggested. “Let’s see what’s cooking.”

In the kitchen Brother Ignatius was taking some scones out of the oven. Brother Bernard was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and eating biscuits. Bernard ate a lot of biscuits, yet remained rake-thin.

Jerome noticed with interest that Bernard was sitting in front of a plateful of what looked like homemade, buttery shortbreads. "Look at that!" he said to Ignatius. "The new cook's been making biscuits for Bernard. I used to get him plain digestives from the market."

Just then, Bernard said to Ignatius, "You're a fantastic cook, Iggy. These biscuits are heavenly."

"Thanks," Ignatius said. "It's a pleasure to cook for you. It's nice to know my work's appreciated. I'll make you some chocolate gingerbreads one day."

Jerome's mouth fell open.

"The food's improved no end since you've been here, Iggy," Bernard said.

"Thanks."

Sourly, Jerome whispered to Aloysius, "So, no one's missing my cooking, then."

Aloysius gave a conciliatory smile. "There was nothing wrong with your cooking." He patted Jerome's arm. "It was fine. But Ignatius is a professional chef. He cooked in hotels before joining the Order."

Jerome looked impressed. "All the same," he said a moment or two later, in a wounded voice, "it's a bit hurtful to hear Bernard saying things like that. I slaved over a hot stove for you all for years, and now I find out no one actually liked my cooking."

"Bernard didn't say that." Aloysius patted Jerome's arm again. "I used to enjoy your Irish stews and your fruit crumbles."

"Did you?" Jerome asked. "Did you really? You're not just saying that?"

"I really did," Aloysius said. "I thought they were smashing. You got them just right."

"I'm so glad," Jerome said with relief. "I wouldn't like to think people had just been enduring my cooking all those years, as a sort of mortification."

"No, no, Jerry. People liked your cooking. It was great."

Bernard pushed back his chair and said to Ignatius, "Well, see you later. Thanks for the snack."

"You're welcome," Ignatius said, as he laid the scones on a rack.

As Bernard went out of the kitchen, Jerome whispered to Aloysius, "You'd think he'd have noticed us, wouldn't you? I mean, he saw me before — you know, when I came out of that tree." He shuddered. "Oh, God, I can still remember that! It was awful being stuck in there. It was a nightmare! I could have been trapped in there forever."

Aloysius shook his head. "Quant wouldn't have left you there for long." Thoughtfully, he added, "I think Bernard saw you then because Quant wanted him to see you. Quant was with Bernard on the path by the oaks, if you remember."

"So he was." Jerome realized with some annoyance that his brethren had watched the scene.

"I think," Aloysius said slowly, "that Quant wanted to show Bernard what to do... how to make a gateway for you to come through... in case you... um... need a helping hand when you come visiting." He went on hastily, "Just at first, of course. You'll soon get the hang of it. Maybe he used the occasion to bring you together as it were, sort of introduce you. Well, reintroduce you, of course."

Jerome remembered the scene in the churchyard. "Quant must have wanted Peter to see me, too. Perhaps he thinks Pete might be able to help me out."

"Perhaps," Aloysius agreed, but he looked puzzled.

"Quant can't have much confidence in me," Jerome remarked, a little bitterly, "if he's letting half the friary know about me. He must think I'm going to need an awful lot of help."

Aloysius shrugged. "Who knows what Quant thinks?"

"I wonder why Quant let Pete see Egbert," Jerome said. "It's not as if Egbert's likely to get stuck anywhere."

"I was wondering that myself," Aloysius said. "I haven't a clue why he wanted Egbert to be part

of the act. Maybe he didn't mind Peter seeing him. Maybe he thought Peter might as well see the full cast."

It struck Jerome as curious that Aloysius referred to the 'act' and the 'cast.' He thought it made the cat sound as if he were some sort of stage master — or maybe a magician, waving a wand when he wanted people or things to appear on stage or disappear into thin air. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad comparison.

"What seems to be clear," Aloysius said, "is that whether people see you or not depends on whether Quant wants them to see you or not. He wanted Bernard to see you. He wanted Peter to see you. It looks like he wanted Bernard to see how to get you out of the tree. Maybe he's got a similar role for Peter to play. After all, it looks as if you're going to be coming and going quite a bit. He may want Peter to help out from time to time. Maybe he was just preparing him for the fact that you're, well, still around, as it were."

"And in need of assistance," Jerome said humbly.

Aloysius patted his arm comfortingly. "You'll soon get used to it. I'll tell you what — we'll get some practice in. We'll have a few practice runs. You'll soon be able to manage on your own."

"Thanks, Al," Jerome said gratefully. "It's a bit funny, though, about Bernie and Pete, isn't it? I mean, when I can come and go on my own, under my own steam as it were, when I've passed my test and taken my L-plates off, will they still be able to see me? Or will they stop being able to see me once I don't need any more help?"

"I've no idea," Aloysius admitted. "Maybe they won't be able to see you then. Bernard didn't see you just now."

"It's a pity he didn't!" Jerome said. "He wouldn't have been so rude about my cooking, if he'd known I was standing here listening. I must say, those biscuits did look delicious, though." He looked at the table and nudged Aloysius. "Look, there are still some left. Do you think...?"

"No," Aloysius said firmly, "we can't have them! We can't eat earthly food anymore."

"That's a pity. They do look tasty. We could have been the Phantom Food Snatchers."

"And Bernard wasn't being rude about your cooking," Aloysius insisted. "You mustn't think that. He was complimenting Ignatius. It's only sensible to compliment the cook — the current cook, that is."

"He never complimented me much," Jerome said sourly.

"That didn't mean he didn't enjoy your food. Of course he enjoyed it. We all did."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! We wouldn't have eaten it if we hadn't enjoyed it."

Jerome looked happier now. "Mind you," he said, after another glance at the biscuits, "Ignatius is a jolly good cook, I've got to admit that. Give him his due."

"He's cooked in the best hotels. He's a trained chef."

"And he's in the kitchen now, not me — well, I am, of course, in a way but not that way — and that's what matters. Bernard knows which side his bread's buttered. But I still think it's a bit much, cozying up to Ignatius like that, just because he makes his own biscuits." Jerome broke off and nudged Aloysius again. "Look at that!"

Ignatius took a bowl of cream out of the fridge.

"Clotted cream! I wonder where he got that? There's nowhere round here that sells it."

Jerome watched with interest as Ignatius took a scone from the rack, cut it in half, buttered it, spread it with cream, then broke it into bite-size pieces and put them, buttered and creamy side up, in the cat's bowl.

Quant appeared in the open doorway, sniffed appreciatively and trotted enthusiastically to the bowl.

"Well, look at that!" Jerome said again. "He's even got Quant eating out of his hand."

By the time the cat had finished his scone and licked his whiskers, Ignatius had poured some milk into his drinking bowl.

The cat started sipping.

"It looks like the friary spends its time snacking," Jerome commented.

Suddenly the cat raised his head and listened with ears pricked.

Heavy footsteps approached the kitchen, and Jerome saw Ignatius roll his eyes and heard him groan. He looked at Quant and saw the cat stiffen.

Gold flashed from the animal's eyes.

"Uh-oh!" Jerome murmured, as the guardian's bulky form appeared in the doorway.

Fidelis's disapproving voice said, "Look, Ignatius, I've told you not to feed that creature in here. It's unhygienic. He shouldn't be in here."

Ignatius, over by the sink with his hands in soapy water, said nothing.

"There's no need for him to be in the house at all," Fidelis continued angrily. "There's no reason why he shouldn't live in the outbuildings. There are plenty of mice in there. Let him catch his food. He's vermin himself." He glowered at the cat.

The animal, his eyes their customary green now, stared innocently back at him.

If only Fidelis knew, Jerome thought.

The guardian, however, pressed on with his attack. "He's savage, you know. He took a lump out of my ankle once."

"Well, I've always found him very well behaved," Ignatius said quietly.

Fidelis snorted and went out of the back door, banging it shut behind him. A car door slammed.

"My!" Aloysius said. "Someone got out of bed on the wrong side this morning."

Ignatius quickly dried his hands and went over to stroke the cat, who nonchalantly licked a paw as if the whole episode had meant nothing to him.

"Poor Leo!" Ignatius said. "You're not vermin, are you?" He ran his hand over the cat's soft fur. "You're a very fine cat, aren't you? A very fine cat indeed. You're beautiful."

The cat stood daintily on tiptoe and rubbed his head against the hem of Ignatius's habit.

Just as he used to do to me, Jerome thought. *Still, full marks to Ignatius for standing up to Fidelis and speaking up for Quant.*

"Why should you live out there?" Ignatius said, patting the cat's head and nodding towards the range of buildings to be seen through the kitchen window. "There's plenty of room for you in the house." He straightened up and as he did so added defiantly, "And plenty of food, too." He went over to the sink, washed and dried his hands again, and then took some dishes from a cupboard.

Jerome heard Aloysius mutter, "Quant wouldn't catch mice. He'd never kill a mouse, not after that business with the net. He owes them."

Jerome turned to ask what he meant, but Aloysius was already beckoning him to the door. As he was about to pass into the corridor, Jerome looked back into the kitchen.

Ignatius, now sorting cutlery, was still oblivious to his presence, but Quant lifted his head and with a familiar flash of gold returned Jerome's glance.

As Jerome followed Aloysius out, he asked, "What did you mean, about Quant not catching mice? And something about a net? What net?"

Aloysius waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, nothing. It's just a debt from past times." He didn't elaborate, but instead asked Jerome, "Well, where would you like to go now? Do you want to have a

look round the church or go for a potter around the grounds?"

Jerome thought for a moment. "I think I'd like to go back, please, if you don't mind."

"Okay," Aloysius said. "As you like. Whatever suits you. We'll come back again another time." He touched Jerome's arm lightly, stared at the wall, and both spirits disappeared into it.

In his room Bernard finished his prayers and decided to go down into the church. On the way, he saw the cat ambling towards him. "Hi, Leo," he said.

The cat stopped beside him and meowed in a friendly fashion.

Bernard looked into the cat's green eyes. "Quant?" he ventured.

The animal regarded him steadily, and after a moment or two Bernard looked away, as the cat obviously wasn't going to and Bernard knew he wouldn't win a staring contest with him. "Well, well," he said, and left it at that, for he couldn't think of anything else to say. He carried on towards the church and the cat continued his journey to wherever he was going.

Bernard sat in a pew by the aisle, close to the side chapel. He pulled his hood over his head, gazed for a few minutes at the crucifix hanging above the steps leading to the altar, then closed his eyes. His mind drifted to a scene far from the hillside on which his friary lay. He saw another hillside, with another cross on it.

As his mind sank more deeply into his trance, the two scenes fused. He was on that other hillside now, staring up with grief and shock and disbelief at the body nailed to the cross. Beside him, women wept and men groaned. Just as he felt that his heart was about to burst, the scene shimmered and grew hazy. The cross grew dim and then faded, the sounds about him lessened and then stopped, and all was silence.

For a moment he had the impression of being suspended in time and space, of existing in the past and the present and everywhere, then he became aware of the sound of footsteps. He heard someone enter the church from the friary, hesitate, then walk softly across the back of the nave and sit down. Silence fell once more.

Bernard said a few prayers and gazed with an expression of wonder and love at the crucifix hanging before him. Then he pushed back his hood, stood and moved into the aisle. He bowed towards the altar, turned and walked quietly past the rows of pews. As he passed by, he glanced at the figure sitting in the back pew, but the friar had his hood pulled low over his face and Bernard couldn't identify him. He thought it might be Peter.

On his way back to his room, he met Valentine coming down the staircase.

Valentine waved his hand towards the kitchen. "I'm just going for a coffee."

"I'll join you," Bernard said.

He stopped briefly to stroke the cat, who was now sitting on a windowsill in a patch of sunlight, licking his paws. The cat purred under his touch.

In the kitchen they found Peter spooning coffee into a mug. Bernard was surprised to see him and wondered whom he had seen in the church.

"Coffee?" Peter asked.

As Bernard and Valentine nodded and went to sit at the table, he took two mugs out of the cupboard. He rummaged around and found a packet of digestive biscuits. As he opened it unenthusiastically, all three friars looked to the rack of scones Ignatius had left on the side table.

"Those scones look nice," Valentine said.

"There should be some shortbreads, too," Bernard added. "Iggy made some earlier." His eyes searched the kitchen. "I wonder what he's done with them?"

"He's probably hidden them," Valentine said.

"Well, there seem to be plenty of scones," Peter said.

They regarded the packet of digestives; no one took a biscuit. Valentine pushed back his chair, and went to fetch plates, knives and the butter dish. From the rack on the side table he removed six scones. "I don't suppose Iggy will miss one or two."

The three friars looked up as they heard the soft pad of sandals on stone in the corridor.

Ignatius laughed when he saw the three faces guiltily turned towards him as he entered the kitchen. "I've caught you fair and square, snaffling my scones!"

"Sorry, Iggy," Peter said, "but they looked so delicious."

"Mmm, they're smashing scones," Valentine mumbled.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Father," Ignatius said in mock reproof. "Didn't your mother ever tell you it was bad manners?"

By way of reply, Valentine took another scone.

Ignatius sighed theatrically and walked to a cupboard in the far corner. He reached to the back of it and returned to the table with a plate of shortbreads. He held it out to each of the friars in turn. "You can have two each," he declared, "and that's your ration."

Three hands reached out. The plate was then covered with foil and returned to the cupboard.

"No pinching any more!" Ignatius warned. "I'll be counting what's left."

He smiled at the indignant mutters of, "Wouldn't dream of it!"

He boiled the kettle, made himself a mug of coffee, and sat down at the table. He didn't take a scone or biscuit himself. Since his arrival at the friary, it had been noted with surprise and amusement that though he cooked like an angel he ate little himself. While he did so much to make other people's mealtimes — and the time in-between mealtimes — such a pleasure, when asked about his own lack of appetite he said he'd lost interest in eating during the time he'd been cooking in hotels.

"I just went off it. Surrounded by food all day, I didn't feel like eating much after a while."

And indeed he always served himself small portions and sometimes just had cheese and biscuits. However, he had assured his fellow friars that he didn't in the least mind cooking for them, provided they enjoyed his food. He had since been left in no doubt that they did.

"I must say," he'd remarked in the dining room one day, "I'd no idea before I joined that you'd all have such good appetites. I'd thought, somehow, that as friars you wouldn't eat much. As it is, it's more like trying to feed an Order of Friar Tucks."

"We're vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience," Bernard had said, "not starvation."

"We need to keep our strength up for all the parish work," Valentine had added.

Oliver had further added, "You can't meditate on an empty stomach. You can't concentrate if your tummy's rumbling."

Ignatius cast a glance round the table. "What's up with Fidelis?" he asked. "He's like a bear with a sore head."

Valentine made a shushing noise and glanced towards the door leading into the corridor.

"It's okay," Ignatius said. "He's out."

Even so, Valentine got up to shut the door.

As it was closing, the cat slipped through the narrowing gap into the kitchen.

"Hello, Leo," Valentine said. "You just made it."

Bernard watched with interest as the animal settled down on his mat in a corner of the room. It was as if he didn't want to miss anything. The creature curled himself into a ball and drifted into a doze. Bernard noticed, though, that his eyes were not quite closed. *He's relaxed*, he thought, *but not switched off*. As if in confirmation of the cat's wakefulness despite his sleeping pose, he caught a gleam of green from beneath the half-closed eyelids.

Valentine made fresh coffee for everyone before sitting down again. "I don't know what's up with Fidelis, but something's got to him. Something's on his mind."

"Perhaps it's our finances," Ignatius suggested. "Maybe we've gone into the red and he's worrying about it."

Peter shook his head. "I think our funds are quite healthy at the moment. Or they should be. We had a big legacy left to us not long ago, just before you came up here."

"Oh, yes," Ignatius said, "I heard about that. What's going to happen to the money?"

Peter shrugged. "It'll go on repairs, I expect. The roof needs mending. The organ needs overhauling. Or perhaps they'll get the church redecorated. It could do with it."

"I think," Valentine said cautiously, "that whatever's upsetting Fidelis has got something to do with the parish."

"You mean, he's worried about parish attendances?" Ignatius sounded surprised. "We seem to get quite good attendances."

"We do," Valentine said. "Maybe that's the trouble."

"How do you mean?" Ignatius looked baffled. "If the numbers are okay, where's the problem? It's when numbers start dropping, you need to worry."

"That's true," Valentine agreed. He hesitated, glancing at Peter. "But maybe it's more the content of the congregation, rather than its size, that's the problem."

As Ignatius stared blankly at Valentine, Bernard noticed Peter, who was sitting opposite Valentine, shake his head ever so slightly, as if in warning.

"Do you mean," Ignatius said, "that we're attracting the wrong types?"

Bernard saw Peter give a quick smile, but the priest said nothing.

Valentine hesitated again before replying, as if suddenly aware that he might be in the process of digging a hole for himself. "Well, I didn't really mean...."

Ignatius, however, continued with his interrogation. "I thought the congregations seemed all right myself."

"Oh, they are," Valentine assured him hastily.

Bernard caught another fleeting smile on Peter's face.

Then Peter came to his friend's rescue. "I think what Val means," Peter told Ignatius, "is that it might be time for an audit of the congregation, as it were. We've had one or two newcomers lately — people who've moved into the area for one reason or another. Maybe we could find out what their interests are. We could see if they've any hobbies that might interest others in the parish."

"You mean," asked Ignatius, "with a view to setting up some clubs? That sort of thing?"

"Possibly," Peter said.

"A gardening club might go down well," Ignatius said. "People could buy and sell plants. Or someone might like to organize trips to the cinema."

"Er, yes," Peter said.

"I like going to the pictures myself," Ignatius commented.

"Er, yes" Peter said again. "Well, there are all sorts of possibilities, I suppose."

Bernard grinned to himself as he put down his coffee cup. He had the distinct impression that Peter had suddenly become aware that he, too, might have dug a hole for himself. He watched the priest's expression grow uneasy.

Ignatius turned now to Valentine. "Or we could set up a painting club. Your skills could come in useful there."

"I'm not sure about that," Valentine said. He frowned at Peter.

Ignatius, however, took his words to be an expression of modesty. "Oh, come, you're a smashing

painter. You're a trained artist. You'd have lots to contribute to a painting club."

At this point, Bernard laughed out loud. As Ignatius turned to him, he said quickly, "No, I've no talents, so don't try to find any for me. And I'm not particularly interested in the cinema or the theater. So count me out of these clubs that are about to spring up. Include me out."

"Well, if you say so." Ignatius looked disappointed.

"Look," Peter said, "aren't we running ahead of ourselves just a little bit? It was only an idea I threw out, just an idea. That's all."

"Well, okay," Ignatius said, "but you never know. Something might come of it."

"It might, it might not," Valentine said, his voice firmer now.

"Okay." Ignatius sounded deflated.

"I'm not saying," Valentine said, "that nothing will come of it. Let's just wait and see."

"Okey-doke." Ignatius pushed back his chair. "But I think there's scope for joint activities in the parish, people getting together."

Bernard saw the thin, sardonic smile flit across Peter's face once more. *I know what he's thinking. He's thinking that certain people are already getting together for joint activities. The wrong people. The wrong activities.*

The cat suddenly lifted his head and looked towards the back door.

"Uh-oh!" Ignatius said, as he heard a car door slam.

He quickly gathered up the empty mugs and plates, hurried over to the sink with them and turned on the tap. He splashed the water noisily.

Peter, Valentine and Bernard made a swift exit from the kitchen.

The cat uncoiled himself, stood, stretched and then sat down again.

"You'd better skedaddle," Ignatius whispered to him as he heard footsteps in the yard.

The cat got up again and slipped silently through the open doorway into the corridor.

The back door was flung open and Fidelis appeared on the threshold.

Ignatius greeted him with a cheerful, "Back again, Father! Cup of coffee?"

Fidelis responded with a smile, though it looked as if it hurt him, and declined the offer of coffee. He went over to the table and helped himself to a couple of digestives from the packet. He glanced suspiciously at the butter dish and the scattered crumbs from the scones and shortbreads on the table, and the four untidily positioned chairs that looked as if they had just been hastily vacated, but he made no comment and strode out of the kitchen, munching.

Ignatius heard him sigh heavily as he started down the corridor.

"Well," he said to himself, as he set the crockery to dry, "something's eating him, that's for sure! And I'd like to know what it is." He dried his hands and went over to the side table. As he arranged the scones on a large plate for teatime, he thought how drained Fidelis had looked. *I wonder if he's ill?*

The guardian had looked pale and drawn. Ignatius wondered why he had not thought of the idea before. And the more he thought about it, the more it seemed a distinct possibility. There was such a contrast between Fidelis now, and Fidelis as he had been not so very long ago. But, unlike Peter and Valentine, he didn't think that whatever was upsetting his guardian had anything to do with parish affairs. Attendances were good — the lists posted after each service showed that. Numbers weren't dropping. In fact, there had been newcomers to the parish even since he'd arrived.

Okay, so they might put on a few more social activities — he'd like to join one or two clubs himself and have a trip out occasionally — but he couldn't see Fidelis worrying himself sick over a few parish get-togethers, or the lack of them. *No*, he thought, *whatever's upsetting Fidelis hasn't got anything to do with the parish. And anyway, we'd know about it if it had. He'd discuss it with us. Parish affairs concern us all.*

As Ignatius busied himself with preparing the next meal, his thoughts clarified themselves, and by

the time he had laid out the trolley, he had become convinced that his guardian was ill and was worried about it. He wondered if it was something terminal. If so, clearly Fidelis was not looking forward to his approaching end.

It had struck Ignatius during his time in the Order that the very people who might have been expected to welcome the angel of death — for he was taking them home, after all — were no more anxious than the rest of the population to end their earthly life. The professionals were no keener to meet their Maker than the rest of His creation appeared to be.

Some of the older friars, who were definitely on the last furlong of the home straight and whom he'd have expected to hurry forward joyfully towards the final post, seemed to hang back the closer they got. Old Father Cyprian, for instance, had definitely slowed down in his reading of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Having declared his determination to get to the end of it before he died, and being on the final book, he had started going back over earlier sections, instead of pressing on towards the last page, as if reluctant to reach it.

Ignatius smiled a gentle, loving smile as he pictured the old priest trying gamely to postpone the inevitable. Then sadness came over his face as his thoughts returned to his guardian, and he wondered if his superior was in pain. He would try to be nicer to him, he decided; he would be sympathetic, kindly. He would ask him what he'd like to eat and would cook little treats for him. He and Fidelis had never got on particularly well. Their relationship had always had a sharp edge to it.

Well, that was going to change — for the better. Softer, gentler days lay ahead. He would let Fidelis know, in his time of trouble, that he cared, and that he was ready to listen should Fidelis wish to talk. He'd let him know that he was praying for him. He'd be there for him.

Chapter Eight

Back in the afterworld, Jerome found himself standing on the grass beside the terrace of the building in which he had finally caught up with his fellow friars. He looked around slowly, taking in his new surroundings. His head swam a little from the pressure of the return journey, and he reached out to steady himself on the stone balustrade. He turned as Aloysius gently took his arm.

"Well done!" said the priest. "You managed that very well."

"You mean you managed it very well. I just accompanied you."

"Well, yes," Aloysius agreed, "but you hung on well. You didn't get lost en route." He looked enquiringly at his fellow friar. "What are your plans now?"

Jerome shrugged with studied casualness. "Well, I might just take a look round here."

"I'll come with you," Aloysius offered quickly.

"There's no need," Jerome told him. "I'll just potter around on my own. I've taken up enough of your time already."

"Time? What time?" Aloysius asked.

Jerome looked puzzled, then laughed. "Of course. Silly me. There's no time here, is there? Not time as such. And for Quant," he added, "there's no time at all, anywhere, is there? It's all the same to him, everywhere, wherever he is."

Aloysius nodded. "Quant's got his own rules." He did not attempt to elaborate on what these rules might be, even if he knew.

Jerome suspected that Aloysius did not know. Quant was a higher form of being than the humans among whom he mingled, whether on earth or in the afterworld.

Aloysius sighed. "I suppose you're set on going into the wood."

Jerome wondered briefly whether to deny his intention but decided against it, as his thoughts seemed to be written in an open book, to be freely read by all. He wondered how private his thoughts had been on earth. Then he stopped wondering about that, as it became too embarrassing to contemplate.

"I thought it would be nice to have a stroll in there," he said, as casually as he could manage. "I like woods. There's something about woods. They're... inviting. They're interesting, full of wildlife." He noticed Aloysius raise an eyebrow, but the priest said nothing. "There was a lovely wood near where I lived when I was little. You'd find all sorts of things in there."

Aloysius reflected for a moment. "Okay," he said. "Let's go! You're bent on seeing the wood. I'll come with you."

"I can go on my own."

Aloysius shook his head. "I'll come, too."

Jerome noticed that they had been joined by Quant, who was now standing on the grass beside him. "Oh, hello!" he said.

Aloysius smiled and leaned down to pat Quant, who arched his back encouragingly and stood on the tips of his paws. Aloysius duly stroked the cat's silken fur. "So you're going to take him yourself, are you?"

Quant meowed.

"It's just as well," Aloysius commented. To Jerome he said, "You could have no better guide."

Jerome looked surprised. "Guide? Do I need a guide? Am I likely to get lost?"

Aloysius gave a laugh that was not entirely one of merriment. "It's not so much a question of getting lost as of..."

"Needing a companion," Quant said.

"That's it," Aloysius agreed. "You need a companion when you go into the wood. At least," he added, "you do at first."

"Why?" Jerome asked curiously. "What's in there?" He saw Aloysius and the cat glance at each other.

"Oh, this and that," Aloysius said, noncommittally. "Like you said, there are all sorts of things in a wood." As if to forestall further questioning by Jerome, he declared briskly, "I'll be seeing you." He patted his friend's arm, climbed the steps of the terrace, turned to wave, and walked between the pillars into the room they had been in earlier.

I bet you'll be seeing me, Jerome thought. *When are you not seeing me?* He glanced towards the room and glimpsed various figures, robed in the habits of his Order, moving about. He pursed his lips crossly. It was quite annoying to realize that one was continually on view. It was like being on stage, continuously, without the opportunity to slip into the wings occasionally.

"Right! When you're ready?" With a paw, Quant indicated the wood.

Jerome glanced again at the room that Aloysius had entered, and saw several of his fellow friars grouped by the pillars, watching him. Hands waved at him in a friendly manner. He waved back, a bit puzzled by the interest his walk was arousing.

Then he turned away from the building, and with Quant beside him set off along the pale, narrow path that led over the lawn and towards the wood. He noticed that Quant kept to the grass and wondered what kind of surface he was walking on. He stopped and bent to examine it. He found that he was standing on marble. It was cold to his touch, as cold as marble had been on earth.

As the lawn merged into the meadow, Jerome looked with interest at the wildflowers on each side of the path and, with pleasure, recognized many.

As he passed through the field, with Quant closer now, he saw that the marble path was petering out. Soon he was walking on little more than a country track. He turned and looked back. The building that housed the friars seemed far away now, though he could make out its pillared façade.

The distant columns brought into his mind an image of Father Egbert bent over his books. Egbert had loved classical architecture, and Jerome reflected how, of all the friars, the old priest in particular must feel at home in a building as pillared as a Greek temple. Egbert had always been keen on the classical world. In fact, he'd been a sight too keen on it for Fidelis, who had one day voiced his suspicion that Egbert half-believed in the old pagan gods. Egbert had protested that of course he was a Christian. He had added, though, that he wasn't entirely sure the old gods had ever gone away. When Fidelis had asked him where, in that case, they might be, Egbert had replied that he thought that perhaps they'd moved aside and were just "somewhere else."

Jerome could recall the look of incredulity he had seen on Fidelis's face. Then Fidelis had become angry and had told Egbert that he ought to be excommunicated. Egbert had said nothing in reply but had merely lit another cigarette, and this had served only to irritate Fidelis more, for he was at the time trying to give up smoking himself, and he had stomped out of the lounge. Jerome had had the feeling at the time that perhaps there had been a grain of truth in Fidelis's accusation.

"Where's Egbert?" he asked Quant.

"He's around," Quant replied. "You'll be seeing him soon."

And sure enough, before they'd gone much further along the track, a robed figure appeared from amongst the trees ahead, and Jerome saw Egbert walking towards them, smiling.

"Eggy!" Jerome exclaimed in amazement. "I was just asking Quant where you were."

Egbert glanced at Quant. "I've been for a stroll."

"We're going into the wood," Jerome said excitedly. He noticed Egbert look at the cat again.

"Enjoy yourself. See you later." Egbert stepped off the track to let Jerome and the cat pass.

"Quant?" said Jerome, as he and the cat continued their journey.

"Yes?"

"Does time exist here, or not?"

"It all depends," the cat said, "on what you mean by time."

"I thought it might. Funny, that."

And with that, the topic was dropped. They were now on the edge of the wood. Quant paused and regarded Jerome. "Well, this is where you wanted to be!" He stepped in front of the friar as they made their way amongst the trees. The track was winding now. Quant kept a few paces ahead.

Jerome looked around with interest. So far everything seemed familiar. Oaks, ashes, birches and firs rose up from the tangled undergrowth to each side. He heard a scuttling in the bushes and saw a flash of reddish fur streak across the path in front of him. He smiled with joy. "Did you see that red fox? And listen to the birdsong! It's glorious in here!" He stopped and listened for a moment. He was about to walk on when his ears picked out another sound. It was the sound of music. "Listen! There's someone playing." He craned his head in an attempt to find where the music was coming from. "It's over there." He pointed to his right, then stepped off the track and peered through the trees. "How strange," he remarked. "It's like a wood within a wood. There's a clearing through there but there's a clump of trees in the center, like a little grove." He looked down at Quant. "Come on, someone's playing the pipes. Let's go and see who it is. It's wonderful music."

But Quant did not budge from the track. Instead, to Jerome's amazement, he bowed low in the direction of the grove. When he had straightened up again, he nodded at Jerome in a beckoning motion and padded on down the track. Something about his demeanor discouraged Jerome from questioning him about this unexpected behavior.

As Jerome followed the cat, the music grew fainter, and then it was only a sweet memory for him.

Jerome's expression was thoughtful as he walked along in the cat's wake. His steps grew slower, and when he saw a boulder at the side of the track he called to Quant that he was going to sit down.

The cat turned back and crouched at his feet, as, Jerome remembered, he used to do in the friary garden.

For a while, Jerome just sat. Then he asked, "Does Egbert often come into the wood?"

The cat nodded.

"And the other friars?"

"Sometimes," the cat said. "They tend not to. Some do, occasionally."

"That music," said Jerome, but he did not finish his sentence, for at that moment his ears picked up the sound of hooves. He looked enquiringly at Quant, who nodded for him to draw back. The cat himself stood up and withdrew to the edge of the trees.

As the pounding of the hooves grew louder, Jerome followed him. He looked up the track and saw the shapes of two horses approaching. "Wild horses," he said to Quant.

But as the horses came fully into view, he saw, with a shock that rooted him to the spot, that the horses' heads and necks were those of men. As the creatures galloped past, they glanced without interest at Jerome but nodded in greeting to Quant. Jerome, stunned, watched them disappear down the path with their tails swishing. When they were out of sight and he could no longer hear the thud of their hooves, he let out his breath and tottered back to the boulder. He collapsed onto it. "My God!" he gasped. "It's all true, isn't it?"

The cat looked at him innocently. "What is?"

"You know," said Jerome. "The centaurs, the pipes... that was Pan playing, wasn't it?" He drew a shaking hand across his forehead. "I can't believe it."

"What can't you believe?"

"No wonder Egbert comes here," Jerome said unsteadily. "Fidelis was right. Egbert is a pagan at heart."

"Careful," the cat murmured. His tone was light, but Jerome heard the warning.

"It's all true," he muttered. "The old gods, the old world." He gazed around in bewilderment. His eyes settled on an oak in full leaf directly opposite him across the track. "My God!" he exclaimed. "That joke you made about tree nymphs!"

Quant looked innocently at him again.

"It wasn't a joke, was it?" Jerome said weakly. "It was a statement of fact. There are tree nymphs, aren't there? And river nymphs. And... and... all sorts of nymphs... and..." he wiped his brow, "and all sorts of other things."

The cat regarded him steadily. His expression had changed and there was something like sympathy on his face. Then he said softly, "Well, you wanted to come into the wood, didn't you?"

"But I'd no idea. If I'd known..." Jerome's voice faded. His face crumpled, as if he were about to cry.

"What would you have done if you'd known?"

Jerome's immediate answer was to bury his head in his hands. He moaned and said faintly, "Well, I might not have come, for a start." He looked wildly at Quant. "I wish now I hadn't."

Quant said nothing, and Jerome went on, "Now that I know what it's really like."

"Do you know?" asked Quant quietly.

"Well, yes." Jerome gestured about him, impatiently, as if pointing out the obvious. "The music, the grove where Pan was, the centaurs... it's the old world, isn't it? It never went away. We thought it had gone away, but it hadn't. It was here all the time." He groaned. "Oh, God! We've been wrong. For two thousand years we've been wrong."

"Have you?"

Jerome stared at Quant as if the animal had taken leave of his senses. "The old gods are all here, aren't they? You know that. I know that now." He shook his head and laughed a little crazily. "I bet, when we get round that bend, we'll see Mount Olympus." He pointed to where the track curved out of sight among the trees, laughed again, and cried, "Why, we'll probably see Apollo riding towards us in his chariot." He met Quant's eyes. He thought he read pity in them and said bitterly, "Where does that leave us?"

A golden light shone from the cat's eyes.

Jerome said, "The old gods rule, okay?" As Quant did not reply, he continued, "Egbert knew all along, didn't he? He knew the old world hadn't passed away. He knew it was still here. We'd just forgotten about it." Quant remained silent. "Fidelis was right — Egbert believed in the old gods. No wonder he'd got a smile on his face when he came out of the wood just now. He knows it's true. It's all true. All the old myths — well, they're not myths, are they? They're what's true, what's real." He closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and looked about him. "My God, Egbert must be really at home here! He always loved the old world."

Jerome stopped abruptly and frowned. "Hang on, it's not the old world, is it? If it's here now, it's the *now* world. It's the world that *is*." He clasped the rosary hanging from the cord around his waist. He ran his fingers over the three knots in the cord. "Well, so much for all that! All our religion was for nothing, wasn't it? Our Lord might as well not have existed." He laughed bitterly. "Silly me! He didn't exist, did He? He couldn't have done. We've been worshipping a myth all this time. And all the time, we should have been sacrificing to Zeus." He gave a wild laugh again. "And Zeus likes stronger stuff on his altar than bread and wine." He sighed deeply. "The bread and wine never turned into the body and blood of our Lord, did they? They couldn't have."

"They did," Quant said quietly.

Jerome stared uncomprehendingly at him.

"They did. They do."

Jerome saw the cat's eyes deepen to a rich gold, a richer shade than he had ever seen before.

"You don't understand, do you?" the cat said.

"I understand that centaurs exist. I've just seen two of them — they galloped past me. I've heard the pipes of Pan. I've heard the great god Pan himself playing. It was him in the grove, wasn't it?" But he didn't wait for Quant's confirmation before continuing, "So... we've been worshipping at the wrong altar. Fact."

The cat shook his head. "No."

"Look, the old world's in. The new world's out."

"No," Quant said again. "They're both in."

"What?" Jerome stared incredulously at the cat. "What do you mean? They can't both exist — they're mutually exclusive."

"They're not and they do."

Jerome stared at him.

"In my father's house," quoted the cat, "'there are many mansions.' You should know your Bible by now."

"But it doesn't mean that."

"How do you know what it means?" asked the cat.

"Well," Jerome said, uncertainly now. "I suppose I don't, really."

"No, you don't. You put an interpretation on it."

"What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying is that there are other interpretations. Other meanings, meanings you haven't even thought of."

"I don't understand you."

"You jumped to a certain conclusion," the cat said. "You read our Lord's words and thought you knew what He meant."

Jerome seized on this. "You just said our Lord."

"I did."

"But you can't believe in Him. You believe in... in...."

"In what?" the cat asked coldly. "What do I believe in?" He regarded Jerome with eyes that were as colorless and brilliant and icy as crystals.

As the diamond eyes bored into him, Jerome knew he had blundered. The heavy, almost sarcastic emphasis in the cat's voice made him realize that Quant didn't need to believe in anything. He didn't need to believe, because he knew. Jerome's own eyes hurt under the piercing, crystalline gaze, and he looked away.

Embarrassed and humbled, he stared at the ground and wondered how he could have been so stupid as to presume anything about this mystical creature, whose true form was unknown to him and might always be so. His trembling hands played with the knotted cord round his waist. "Well, er... well, I don't know."

"No, you don't know. So don't make assumptions."

"Sorry." Jerome bit his lip. When he dared to look up, he found that he was now looking into the green, cat-like eyes he knew so well. With his thoughts whirling, he gestured towards the surrounding wood. "But where does all this fit in?"

"Fit in with what?" the cat asked.

"Well, with our world. Our Christian world. The world of our Lord."

"Our Lord is the Lord of all things, Lord of all creation."

"Lord of this world, too?" Jerome asked.

"Of course. He is Lord of all."

"But I don't understand."

The cat gave him a look that indicated that there were many things that Jerome didn't understand.

"But how can He be Lord of this world?" Jerome asked, waving an arm to take in the surrounding wood.

"He is Lord of all worlds."

Suddenly the trees around Jerome faded, and he seemed to be floating in a starlit sky. Before his eyes, galaxy after galaxy unfolded, each one teeming with life. In his ears was a sound like a distant drumbeat, and he knew he was hearing the heartbeat of the universe; he was listening to creation breathing, and worshipping its Lord. "Yes, He is Lord of all worlds." Jerome bowed his head in awe and reverence. Then the scene and the sound faded, and he found himself once more sitting on a boulder in the middle of a wood with a small ginger cat at his feet. And he knew that the cat had many forms and lived in many worlds.

The cat's green eyes were fixed on him, and as Jerome stared into them he saw them lose their color again. They sparkled like crystals, like diamonds catching the light. Under their brilliance, Jerome closed his own eyes.

Now he heard the soft flap of wings. He opened his eyes quickly, eager to see what wondrous creature, or creatures, might be flying by, but he saw only a small cat washing his paws.

"Er, Quant?"

Familiar green eyes looked at him.

"Oh, nothing."

The cat resumed his washing.

"Er, Quant?"

Patiently, the cat looked up again.

Jerome held up the crucifix on his rosary. "This is true, isn't it? It is true?"

"Of course it is," the cat said. "Your heart should tell you that."

"It does," Jerome said. "But my eyes have seen sights I never thought I'd see. My ears have heard music I never thought I'd hear."

"Ah, well..."

Jerome stared at the oak opposite him. His eyes searched it as if trying to make out the dryad inside it. His fingers gripped the crucifix hanging from his waist. "There are a lot of mansions in our Lord's house, aren't there?"

"A lot," the cat agreed.

"And our Lord is Lord of all."

The cat nodded.

"Lord of all religions. Lord of all worlds."

The cat watched him.

"He has many forms, many names. We don't know all his forms, all his names."

"We?" said the cat.

"We humans," said Jerome.

"Ah, humans."

"That hymn Sidney Carter wrote," Jerome went on, as if thinking aloud, "the one about the stars

and planets. What's it called now? Ah yes. *Every Star Shall Sing a Carol, Every Creature High and Low*. Well, all those carols — they're being sung to the same Lord, aren't they? He might have different names and different forms in different places, but He's the same Lord, isn't He? Everyone's singing to the same Lord, the same divine power." Jerome seemed to struggle with his thoughts. Hesitantly, he went on, "Our Lord takes forms that are appropriate to... appropriate to the world that's worshipping Him. In our world, we have humans and animals. These are forms we see and know. So we see His divinity in human or animal form, and sometimes both together. In other worlds, our Lord will appear in forms that are..." Jerome clasped his hands together as he searched for the word he wanted, "*suitable* — suitable for those worlds. But he's the same God. One Godhead. God of all. God of all creation. God at the center of all things, all life."

The friar and the cat sat in silence.

Then Quant stood up. "That's enough thinking for now."

Jerome got up from the boulder and shook his crumpled habit. "Quant," he said, as the cat ambled along the path once more.

The cat stopped and looked back.

"Thank you," Jerome said.

"What for?"

"Being patient."

The cat waved a paw. "You're welcome. Come on." He set off along the track again.

Jerome followed, peering with interest and an air of expectation among the trees to each side. At intervals he halted and listened, perhaps hoping to hear again the music he had heard earlier.

He heard nothing beyond the expected sounds of forest life, however, and he soon continued on his way. At last the woodland thinned out, and through a gap in the trees to his left Jerome caught a glimpse of green grass in the distance. So, they were nearing the edge of the wood and he would soon be back with the friars. Thinking of the conversation he would have with them, he didn't notice the crossroads ahead until he was almost upon it.

As he followed Quant towards the crossing of the two paths, Jerome heard an animal howl and stopped in his tracks at the sound. At first he thought it was a fox, then he saw, silhouetted among the trees to his right, a large dog. It howled again, and Jerome, not wanting to draw the creature's attention to himself, stayed where he was.

Quant, he noticed, glanced in the direction the sound had come from and carried on walking. Jerome was surprised at this insouciance, having half-expected to see the cat scramble up the nearest tree. Then he remembered that Quant was no ordinary cat. This caused him to wonder what kind of dog this was. He advanced cautiously, keeping a wary eye on the animal. He saw the dog put his head down and, with his nose to the ground, move purposefully down the path it was on, towards the crossroads.

As it drew nearer and came clearly into view, revealing itself to be a huge black hunting dog, Jerome slowed his pace. There was no point in asking for trouble.

The dog, moving steadily, unhurriedly, across his path, gave him no more than a cursory glance. Quant, though, he acknowledged with a deep-throated woof. Then he was gone from sight, hidden among the trees.

Jerome ran to catch up with the cat. "What was that? Was it one of Hecate's hounds?"

Quant kept on going.

Jerome kept pace with him. "I asked you..." he said, but the cat interrupted him.

"I heard you."

"Well, what was it?" Jerome said breathlessly, but more from excitement than because he was

puffed out, for the cat was not walking particularly fast. "Was it really... you know... one of Hecate's dogs? We were right by the crossroads."

The cat paused, regarded him and sighed. "You're so dramatic."

"Dramatic? That dog was something to be dramatic about! It was enormous. And it howled — a howl to waken the dead."

The cat padded on quietly.

"It was after someone," Jerome said. "It had its nose to the ground — it was following someone's scent." He shivered. "I'm glad I wasn't his prey."

To his surprise, Quant gave a meowing laugh.

"What's funny about it?" asked Jerome. "He was hell-bent on pursuing some poor soul."

"Try heaven-bent," the cat said softly.

"Sorry?" said Jerome, thinking he had misheard the creature.

But Quant merely swished his tail, quickened his steps, and trotted forward.

Soon Jerome was following him into the wildflower meadow they had crossed earlier on their way into the wood. Ahead, he saw the lawn they had walked over, and beyond it the building from which they had set out. It crossed his mind that it might be an ethereal friary. The image of his old friary on earth drifted across his mind, and he fleetingly wondered which was the shadow of which.

Now he saw, too, other buildings he had not noticed before, and it occurred to him that perhaps his eyes were becoming better adjusted. He wondered what else he might see as his sight became more acute. His former friary came into his memory again, and he remembered how he used to watch the swallows that nested there darting after insects he couldn't see. He had often thought that if only he were able to see as they did, he would probably find the air quite crowded with flying things.

As he and the cat reached the far side of the field, Jerome saw a clump of tall grasses to his left ripple and sway, as if some force were passing through. To his amazement, the big black dog he had seen in the wood came into view and padded across the turf, making for a pale, stone, towered building that reminded Jerome of a church he had once seen, though where he had seen it he couldn't recall. The hound vanished into it.

"How strange," Jerome remarked, "to see that dog here. I thought he belonged to the wood... the old world and all that. I didn't expect to see him here."

Quant carried on towards the lawn.

"I thought he was one of Hecate's dogs," Jerome continued. "Maybe he isn't. Maybe he was just passing through the wood. I wonder what that building is that he's gone into? It looks like a church."

"It is a church," Quant confirmed.

"Oh. Is it... our church?"

"Of course. Your friars will take you into it."

"I wonder why that dog went into it?" Jerome said, as they started across the lawn. The question was barely out of his mouth before the cat's softly spoken words of a few moments earlier came back to him, and he heard them distinctly, ringing out in his mind as clearly as the peal of a church bell. "It's the hound of heaven," he said to Quant, "isn't it?"

Chapter Nine

Father Fidelis stared moodily out the window of his study. He was trying, without success, to write a sermon. Inspiration would not come. After a lot of thought, he had written one sentence. He laid down his biro, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and said a prayer to his guardian angel. He said a Hail Mary, too. He opened his eyes, looked out the window again, then got up and went into his bedroom. He took his prayer book from his bedside table and returned to his desk. He turned to the section entitled *Prayers for Various Needs*, but could not find a prayer suitable for his present need. He sighed deeply.

His sermons weren't usually a problem, either in the planning or the delivery — especially the latter. He knew he was regarded as something of a star performer in the pulpit, knew indeed that within the Order he was jokingly, enviously perhaps, referred to as “the preacher with the golden voice.” But his golden stream of words had run dry. His eloquence had evaporated. It had been quite a struggle to get through his last few sermons.

How could he concentrate, with her in the congregation, her seductive eyes fixed on his face, tempting him even as he preached? With unease in his heart, how could he concentrate on the Lord's work? Frustrated, he drummed his fingers on the desk, angry with her, angry with himself, angry with the whole damn situation.

Fidelis did not at first hear the tapping on his door. When he did, he gave an impatient mutter and got up from his chair. He was surprised to see Brother Ignatius in the doorway.

“Can I fetch you a cup of tea, Father?”

“No thanks,” Fidelis replied curtly, and began to close the door. Noting the disappointment on the cook's face, he paused and added, a little more graciously, “But thanks for asking, all the same.”

As the door began to close again, Ignatius asked hurriedly, “Well, how about coffee or hot chocolate?”

Fidelis stared at him suspiciously. He had never got on particularly well with Ignatius, and was puzzled by this sudden desire to bring him refreshments of some kind.

“No thanks.”

“Well, is there anything special you'd like to eat this evening, Father?”

“Er, no, I don't think so.”

“Oh, okay. Well, let me know if you change your mind. If there's anything you fancy, I'm sure I can rustle it up.”

Fidelis, baffled by this unexpected concern for his appetite, stared hard at Ignatius, but saw only a cook anxious to serve in the manner he thought most appropriate. “Thanks for the offer,” he said, “but I'll have whatever the rest of the chaps are having.” Firmly, he added, “I'll get back to my sermon now.”

“Right you are, Father.” Ignatius stepped back into the corridor. “But you know you've only got to ask. Any time you want something special for dinner or lunch — or you'd like a little supper dish — you've only got to say the word.”

“Thanks. That's kind of you.”

Fidelis shut the door and returned to his desk. *That was weird! I wonder what's up with Ignatius?*

Valentine was in his room. He had been meditating, sitting straight-backed on a hard chair with his hands folded in his lap. Now, with his eyes and mind refocusing, he slipped across to his armchair and

settled himself comfortably in it. From the small table alongside his chair he took some sheets of paper and a pencil. He had been asked to design a cover for a book that one of his fellow friars had written. Having a bit of a runny nose, he rummaged in the pocket of his habit for his handkerchief. Along with his hanky, he withdrew from his pocket the postcard that Bernard had given him on their walk and that he had forgotten about. He looked at the picture again, re-read the message on the back and put the card on the table.

Then he turned his attention to the matter of a suitable design for a book cover. No idea suggested itself. Idly, he looked round his room. His gaze came to rest on a portrait hanging on the far wall. It was the image of a friar from earlier days, a friar revered in the Order for his uncompromising life of austerity. Valentine admired the extreme simplicity of Father Wilfred's lifestyle and the rigor with which he had adhered to his professed vows. For Valentine felt that life in the Order now was a little too easy, a little too soft. Obviously, times had changed and few people nowadays would willingly shiver in an unheated friary or walk for miles when they could drive, but even so Valentine felt that a bit more hardship, a bit more mortification of the flesh, would be no bad thing.

As he stared at the portrait and reflected on the harsh life the earlier friar had led, he found his thoughts drifting to the friars in the Order now. A few, he knew, kept their vows all the time, or strove to do so. Others managed to keep a couple of vows most of the time. The rest struggled to be faithful to even one vow.

Valentine had come to the Order with an idealistic view of what religious life would be. Quite quickly, while not becoming disillusioned, he had come to understand that his brethren, after taking their vows, remained essentially the same people that they had been before taking them. They all loved their Lord and wanted to serve Him, but they were men with men's frailties. Their passions, their weaknesses, their likes and dislikes did not leave them at the friary door. His idealism had given way to realism as it had dawned on him that life inside the Order was, in many respects, pretty much like life outside: a community was a community, whatever size it might be.

Gradually his mind wandered back to the friar in the portrait and he gazed at the ascetic face. Calm, gray eyes stared unblinkingly back. A moment later Valentine realized, with a heart-stopping sense of shock, that the eyes had changed color. The gray eyes were now blue, cornflower blue. And they were no longer focused on a distant horizon: they were looking at him. He gulped.

Then the eyes blinked.

Valentine gripped the arm of his chair, his knuckles white. "My God!" he breathed. It was part exclamation, part prayer for protection. He shut his own eyes tightly, then opened them again and forced himself to look towards the portrait on the wall. He fixed his gaze on the shoulders, swallowed a couple of times, then slowly raised his eyes to take in first the lower and then the upper part of the portrait's face.

As, again, he found himself staring into bright blue eyes, he told himself that he had been mistaken and that Father Wilfred's eyes had been blue and that he had only thought they were gray. But he did not believe himself. He knew that the eyes had been gray before and that they were now blue. And he knew that instead of looking into the distance, they were looking directly at him. And as they regarded him, it seemed to Valentine that they registered surprise.

This recognition of their essential humanity lessened his fear slightly. He had the feeling that the eyes were rather baffled to find themselves looking at him. They blinked again, twice, quickly, then the eyelids shut firmly and stayed closed for a few moments.

Valentine kept his gaze fixed on the portrait, and when the eyelids in it reopened he saw that the eyes were gray and lifeless again and that they stared once more into the distance. They were dead eyes: whatever life force had passed into them had passed out again.

Valentine relaxed his grip on the armrest of his chair and lay back. He felt drained and traumatized. He wondered if he had been hallucinating. Nervously, he snuck a look at the picture. He saw a thin, serene face with calm, gray eyes. Calm, still, gray eyes. They weren't blue; they didn't blink; they weren't looking at him. He told himself he must have imagined it all. Yet, again, he didn't believe himself. He knew he'd seen the eyes change color, knew he'd seen them blink.

"My God!" he said to himself. "Either I'm going bonkers or that picture's haunted." He steepled his fingers, then put his palms together. "Please, Lord, don't let me be going mad."

He frowned and looked at the painting again. He didn't want to go mad, but neither did he want to live with a haunted painting. Suppose the eyes started watching him on a regular basis... changing color and watching him. Suppose they started blinking. My God, it was the stuff of nightmares. He wouldn't be able to sleep for thinking about it. He'd be too terrified to sleep.

The tap at his door almost made him jump out of his skin. He saw the handle start to turn, and as it turned he heard another tap, louder this time.

Slowly, the door opened. Father Fidelis peered round it cautiously. "Oh, hello. I wasn't sure if you were in or not." He bustled into the room then stared at Valentine in surprise. "You look as if you've just seen a ghost."

Valentine twitched.

"Are you all right?" Fidelis asked, concern in his voice.

Valentine nodded, and waved his superior to a chair. "Fine. Yes, just fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm okay, thanks." Valentine sat up and tried to look businesslike. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering how you were getting on with that book cover," Fidelis said. "Paschal was asking how it was coming along. I said I'd let him know." He got up from his chair and walked over to where Valentine was sitting. He glanced at the blank paper on Valentine's knee, then at the sheets on the small table beside him. He picked up the postcard resting on them and studied the illustration with interest. "May I?" He turned the card over and read the message on the back. Then he looked again at the picture on the front and returned the card to the table. "Where did you get this?"

"Bernard found it down Cowpat Lane. We went for a stroll."

"Oh," Fidelis said. "Nice picture."

"It is, isn't it? It's quite a good reproduction."

There was a brief silence, then Fidelis said, "Well, let me know when the book cover's ready. Paschal wants me to send it down to him."

"Sure," Valentine said. "I'll get on with it now."

"Right." Fidelis stood for a moment, then moved towards the door. "Well, er, see you later." He went out, shutting the door quietly behind him.

With a sigh, Valentine straightened the sheets of paper on his knee and picked up his pencil. Then he put the pencil on the side table, clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. He remained in that position for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling, searching his mind for inspiration for his design.

Still no ideas came, and in the end he put the paper on the table and got up. Perhaps a cup of coffee might help. He went to the door and opened it, but before he left the room he looked back, nervously, at the portrait on the wall. He stared at the gray, still eyes. They were flat, unseeing, painted eyes, dead eyes. He shivered and left the room.

He found the kitchen empty and made himself a cup of coffee. As soon as he had sat down at the table, Peter came in.

"Hi!" Peter, too, made himself some coffee. He sat down opposite Valentine. "I've just been out

for a stroll along the lane," he remarked. "I felt like a bit of fresh air." He was obviously expecting a conversation to begin, and seemed a bit put out when Valentine said simply, "Yes, it's a nice day, isn't it?"

Peter glanced sharply at his friend. "Is everything all right?" As Valentine struggled to reply, he asked, "What's wrong?"

Valentine turned an anguished face to him. "Don't laugh, but I think I'm going crazy."

Peter didn't laugh. To Valentine's surprise, he didn't even smile. Instead, he asked quietly, "What's happened?"

"Well, it sounds stupid, really, but... you know that picture in my room?"

"Which picture?"

"You know, the portrait of Father Wilfred. It's on the far wall."

"Oh yes."

"It came alive." Valentine looked nervously at Peter, as if expecting him to burst into guffaws of laughter.

Peter didn't laugh. He leaned forward, put his elbows on the table and looked hard at Valentine. "Tell me about it."

"Well, the picture just came alive. I was looking at it, and it... changed. The eyes changed. Wilfred's eyes were gray, and all of a sudden, they changed to blue. And... they blinked." Valentine searched Peter's face for signs of disbelief and amusement, but he didn't meet with the reaction he had been expecting. "Do you... actually believe me?"

"I don't disbelieve you."

"I thought you'd laugh. It sounds barmy, doesn't it?"

Peter's only reply was to lift his cup to his lips and slowly take a sip of coffee.

"I thought I must be going mad," Valentine said. "You know, hallucinating — that kind of thing. But, well, I'm sure I wasn't. Those eyes really did change. They changed color, from gray to blue, and then they blinked. Then they closed, properly, just for a moment, and when they opened, they were gray again, and... they were just painted eyes — dead, painted eyes, just eyes in a picture, the same as they'd always been." He took a gulp of coffee, his hands clasped tightly round the cup. "It was horrible!" He shuddered. "It was as if they'd come alive. You're looking at a picture and suddenly it looks back at you." He shivered. "And yet," he added, puzzled, "it didn't seem to be Wilfred looking at me. It seemed to be someone else's eyes altogether. I wonder if it was demonic possession?" He made the sign of the Cross. "Perhaps some evil spirit took over Wilfred's portrait and was looking out through it — looking into our world, looking into my room, looking at me!" He gulped down more coffee. "I'd better get it exorcised, though I've never heard of a picture being exorcised." He looked at Peter, who was watching him with great interest. "I suppose it could just be haunted and not demonically possessed," he suggested, with a note of hope in his voice. "I think I might be able to live with a haunted picture, once I'd got used to it."

"I don't think it's haunted," Peter said slowly, "not haunted as such. And I certainly don't think it was taken over by an evil spirit."

"Well, in that case, I must be going batty, imagining things. Seeing the eyes in a picture change color and blink isn't exactly rational behavior, is it?"

"Perhaps not," Peter agreed.

"So, you do think I'm going crazy?"

"No, I don't."

"Do you mean you believe that picture really changed? You believe I wasn't seeing things?"

Peter nodded.

Valentine stared at him. "Well, what's your explanation, if you don't think it was demonic possession and you don't think it was a haunting? Hang on, you said you didn't think it was a haunting as such?"

Peter nodded again.

"What did you mean? Do you think my picture's haunted or not?"

"I think," Peter said cautiously, "that there was some kind of spirit in your picture, but that it wasn't a ghost as such. Not your traditional ghost, anyway."

Valentine stared at him. "Well, what sort of ghost was it, then? What kind of spirit was it?"

"I think," Peter answered carefully, "that it might have been the spirit of a friar who once lived here."

"Someone like Wilfred, you mean? But not Wilfred?"

"I don't think it was Wilfred, or the eyes wouldn't have changed color. I think it was someone who was here... quite recently."

Valentine stared at him. "You know who it was?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. I've got an idea, that's all. Just an idea."

"Who do you think it was?"

Peter stared into his coffee cup. He said nothing.

"Who do you think it was?" Valentine persisted.

"I'm not sure," Peter repeated, reluctant to come out with a name.

"Have you been seeing things yourself?"

Peter did not answer.

"Is there something... supernatural going on round here?"

Peter met Valentine's gaze. "I think so."

"My God!" Valentine gasped. Strangely, he felt somewhat reassured now. "Have you seen things?" he asked again.

"I might have done."

"What have you seen?" There was a hint of excitement in Valentine's voice. "Have you seen those blue eyes, too?"

"I might have done." Peter sounded studiously noncommittal. He suddenly turned his head sharply, listened for a moment and put his finger to his lips. "Shh."

"Does anyone else know about it?" Valentine whispered.

"I don't know," Peter replied softly. "Keep mum for the moment, anyway. We'll talk about it later."

"You will tell me what's going on?"

"I don't know what's going on."

"But something is?"

"It might be." Peter put his finger to his lips. "Shh. Don't say a word to anyone."

The kitchen door was pushed open noisily, so noisily that Valentine had the impression that someone was theatrically announcing his arrival.

As Fidelis strode into the room, Valentine wondered whether his guardian had been standing outside in the corridor, trying to pick up on the conversation. His suspicion grew as Fidelis said in a friendly way, "Hi, chaps! Any coffee on the go?"

"Sure!" Peter got up from the table and went to switch the kettle on. He glanced at Valentine in a warning sort of way, a glance that Valentine thought Fidelis intercepted, for he saw his guardian look at him sharply, questioningly.

But Fidelis said nothing and went to take a cup out of the cupboard.

Valentine pushed back his chair and stood up.

“Are you joining me?” Fidelis asked as he took the milk jug from the fridge.

Valentine shook his head. “I’d better get on with that book design for Paschal.” He took his cup to the sink, washed it and put it on the draining board. “I’ll see you later.”

He glanced round as he pushed the door open, and saw that Fidelis was watching him. The expression on his guardian’s face was one of mingled anxiety and questioning. Fidelis gave him a cheery enough smile, however.

Valentine walked along the corridor thoughtfully. He felt certain that his guardian had been standing outside the kitchen door, listening to his conversation with Peter. He wondered how much Fidelis had overheard. It occurred to him, as he recalled Fidelis’s curiously worried expression, that he, too, might have seen something. Had some apparition from the past visited Fidelis? Had he also suddenly found himself staring into eyes that had chilled him to the marrow? If so, no wonder he’d been edgy.

The more Valentine thought about it, the more convinced he became that his guardian had seen something... something that had seriously worried him.

As he climbed the stairs, he looked uneasily over the banisters into the stairwell, as if half-expecting to see some ghostly apparition manifest itself in the hallway below. The hall, however, was empty, apart from the cat, who was padding along towards the kitchen. There was definitely something going on, Valentine decided. Peter had all but confirmed it.

Valentine was at his bedroom door now. He gripped the doorknob but stopped short of turning it. For a minute or two he stood still, breathing deeply, trying to calm his racing heart. Then he gritted his teeth and entered his room.

He looked nervously at the far wall, but the painted image of the late Father Wilfred hung innocently, lifelessly, flatly, on its picture hook. The gray eyes were unseeing behind the glass. It was a portrait again, a picture in a frame — nothing more.

Valentine sat in his armchair and took up his paper and his pencil. He glanced once or twice, quickly, at the painting but found no change. Relieved that things seemed to be back to normal, he began to sketch a design for Paschal’s book cover. But his thoughts soon wandered back to his guardian, and he put down the pencil and leaned back in his chair. He decided that he had misjudged Fidelis in attributing his recent moods and snappy temper to woman trouble. He was sure now that his guardian had seen something that had upset and frightened him, something that had scared the wits out of him. And it seemed likely that, catching the tail end of the conversation in the kitchen, Fidelis had realized that others, too, had seen it. Maybe he had wanted to talk about it.

Valentine recalled his superior’s surprising eagerness to join himself and Peter at the table, and he felt like kicking himself for having dashed away. He had let Fidelis down. He’d not been there for him when he’d been needed. Just when Fidelis, finding he hadn’t been the only one seeing things, had decided to seize the opportunity and talk about what had been worrying him, he had snatched the chance away from him by rushing off.

Drat! Valentine felt really annoyed with himself for having hurried away. Why hadn’t he stayed put? Why hadn’t he read the situation correctly and realized that Fidelis wanted to get things off his chest? With the right encouragement, he would have discussed his problem. He might have talked to Peter, who had remained in the kitchen, but Valentine doubted it. Fidelis and Peter had never exactly hit it off. The chemistry between them had never been quite right. Fidelis had always found Peter a bit too sharp, too abrasive. Those two had never got on well, though of course they were civil to each other — they had to be, living under the same roof. But if he’d been there, Fidelis would have been more forthcoming. They’d have chatted freely, easily.

Valentine wondered whether to return to the kitchen, but he didn't move from his chair, for he sensed that, even if Fidelis were still there, the moment for confidences had passed. Things wouldn't be the same. The circumstances had already changed. Drat again! He could have helped Fidelis by listening to him sympathetically. No wonder the chap had been so jittery lately. Seeing some horrible sight from another world, another life, was enough to destabilize anyone.

With a shudder, Valentine remembered the shock he had felt on seeing bright blue eyes looking at him from a picture. He glanced nervously at the painting, but, thankfully, saw lifeless gray eyes fixed on some distant horizon.

His thoughts returned to Fidelis, and he felt compassion for him. The chap had responsibilities for his friars. He was their guardian, their protector. Some revenant had come into their world, and it was up to Fidelis to get rid of him, to get him back to his own world, where he belonged.

Sympathy swept over Valentine as he thought about the plight his guardian was in. The chap was obviously worried sick, wondering what to do about the unwelcome visitor, wondering how to persuade him to go away. He could have him exorcised, of course, but that would mean letting other people in on the secret, and he'd obviously been trying to keep the problem to himself. Up to now, he had borne his burden alone. Now, thanks to a few words of overheard conversation, he had realized that others, too, had seen what he had seen.

Valentine clasped his hands together decisively. He had let Fidelis down once: he wouldn't let him down again. He would give him another opportunity to talk. He picked up his pencil and quickly completed the sketch he had been working on. He would take it to show to Fidelis. He'd discuss it with him, ask him what he thought of it, see if he had any ideas to suggest; he would draw him into conversation.

He glanced out the window. It was a lovely afternoon, warm and sunny. Perhaps his guardian might care to join him on a stroll? He would propose a walk up Cowpat Lane. They would be able to have a sit down on the bench there and enjoy the view. They could have a nice, friendly, uninterrupted chat.

Valentine got out of his chair, took the sketch, and went to knock on Fidelis's door.

Chapter Ten

Bernard rummaged round in the storeroom and found what he was looking for: the old, folding canvas chair that he remembered having seen the last time he was in there. He brushed the dust and cobwebs off it, opened and examined it, tested the strength of the fabric, and carried it outside. He walked through the kitchen garden and into the orchard that lay beyond.

The trees in the orchard were overgrown, for there were no friars in the house who knew how to prune fruit trees. Some of the fruit was picked for Ignatius to cook and some was left for the birds and the wasps to eat.

Bernard liked the orchard, for it reminded him of his own childhood spent in the country, in a cottage that had a small orchard of its own and a hen run for the bantams. Hens had once been kept in this orchard, too, but they were long gone, together with the animals that had grazed the neighboring fields in the summer and been taken into the outbuildings in the winter.

Now the fields were rented out and the buildings contained little other than old sacking and baler twine, a few empty fertilizer bags and Peter's motorbike.

Bernard carried the chair to the far end of the orchard and set it beneath an apple tree where he would be out of the sun. He sat down slowly and carefully, for he was not confident of the holding properties of the canvas. However, it appeared the chair would bear his weight and he settled back. He cupped his hands behind his head, making a pillow. Then he closed his eyes.

A faint breeze rustling through the leaves sounded like a lullaby and his thoughts drifted. He recalled the cottage garden of his early home and saw the little orchard and the apple blossom on the trees. A small flock of bantams clucked and pecked in the grass, and he remembered the warmth of their new-laid eggs. He remembered, too, the china eggs his mother used put in the henhouse to encourage the hens to lay.

Suddenly his ears picked up a fresh sound and he realized that people were approaching him over the grass and chatting as they walked. Curiously, they did not seem to see him, for they walked right by without acknowledging his presence. For his part, he seemed to be caught in some sort of sleep paralysis, for, though he was quite aware of his fellow visitors to the orchard, he seemed to be pinned, immobile, in his chair. He could not move, yet he saw these other friars distinctly — there were three of them — and heard what they were saying. Though they wore the same habits as himself, he did not recognize their faces. He wondered who they were and why he did not know them, for clearly they lived in the friary and this was their orchard as much as it was his.

Intrigued, he listened to their conversation and found, to his surprise, that they were talking about taking cattle to market. *How strange*, he thought, *they're talking about animals kept here, yet it's years since this was a working farm.* They were still chatting about farm animals and the prices they might expect at the forthcoming market when they strolled out of sight among the trees. Their voices grew distant and soon he could no longer make out what was being said.

Bernard became aware of a movement to his side, and he found he could turn his head. His body had regained its flexibility, and he turned to find another robed figure in his field of vision. Brother Jerome stood looking at him, his blue eyes shining brightly in a ray of sunlight.

"My, you look comfy!"

Bernard blinked. "Hi, Jerry." He looked around with a puzzled expression. "I wonder where they've gone? And who they were?"

"Who *who* were?"

"Those friars who were here a few moments ago."

"What friars?"

Bernard looked uncertain. "Well, perhaps I was dreaming. Yes, I must have been. I dreamt some friars were here in the orchard."

"Perhaps some were," Jerome suggested.

"But, Jerry, they were talking about when this was a farm. It hasn't been a working farm for donkey's years. They were talking about taking animals to market."

"You must have dreamt it." Then Jerome frowned. "Unless there was some sort of... time lapse."

"Time lapse? How do you mean?"

"I'm not quite sure," Jerome said slowly, "but time seems to do strange things. I don't think it works quite as we think it does."

Bernard noticed his deceased brother's inclusive use of 'we' and wondered whether Jerome actually considered himself to be dead. He did not pursue this topic. "How do you mean? About time, I mean, and the way it works."

"I'm not sure. It's a feeling I have. I think it might be like... a blank sheet of paper we walk across. Perhaps we don't always walk in a straight line."

"You mean I walked backwards?"

"You might have done, I suppose."

"Well, fancy that!" Bernard said excitedly. "I wonder if it'll happen again? I might see all sorts of people who once lived here." Thoughtfully, he remarked, "You know, Jerry, I wasn't frightened at all."

"I don't think you had anything to be frightened of."

"Jerry," Bernard asked tentatively, "um, what's it like where you are?"

"You'll find out in due time," Jerome replied firmly, in a tone that indicated clearly that he did not intend to discuss the subject.

Bernard read the unspoken message to let well alone. However, curiosity overcame prudence and he couldn't resist asking, "Well, do you move about in time, where you are? I mean, do you see things that happened earlier?"

"Earlier?" Suddenly, Jerome seemed to be back in the wood, watching centaurs gallop past and hearing the haunting music of the great god Pan.

Bernard stared at Jerome's face, which was turned away from him now. It bore an expression he could not decipher. From the angle of Jerome's head, though, Bernard had the impression that his companion was listening to something. He listened himself, but could hear nothing.

When Jerome turned back to Bernard, he seemed not to see him at first, for he looked straight through him. Then his blue eyes refocused. "What were you saying, Bernie?"

"It doesn't matter. I say, Jerry, why are you here? I mean, why are you here now? Why have you come into the orchard?"

Jerome shrugged. "I don't know. There's no particular reason, as far as I can see. I just found myself here."

"Nothing specific fetched you here?"

"Not as far as I know."

"You weren't thinking about the orchard?"

Jerome shook his head. "No, not particularly. I was just thinking about the friary generally. I was remembering what it was like, remembering how things used to be." He stopped abruptly, then repeated slowly, "Used to be." He looked puzzled and sounded doubtful, as if he were asking himself a question.

Once more Bernard felt he had momentarily been forgotten, as a far-away expression passed across Jerome's face.

Then Jerome continued briskly, "No, I wasn't thinking about the orchard in particular — just about the place generally. Next thing I knew, I was standing here, with you sitting in that chair. I thought you were asleep. I thought you'd dozed off in the sun."

"Perhaps I had." Bernard regarded Jerome thoughtfully. "Can you go where you like?" he asked. "I mean, when you're trying?"

"I don't know," Jerome answered. "I think I should be able to, in theory. In practice, well," he shrugged his shoulders, "that's a different matter. I can plan to go somewhere, but it doesn't mean I'll get there. I might get nearly there, but..." His voice tailed off and he appeared embarrassed.

"Oh yes, you got stuck in that tree, didn't you? Hey, what other places have you been stuck?"

"Mind your own business," Jerome said, then admitted, "I got stuck on the stairs."

"On the stairs?"

"Well, in the post at the bottom of the stairs, actually... behind some grapes. I must have lost my concentration. I got most of the way here, then found myself wedged behind that damn carved fruit."

Bernard tried not to laugh, but in a moment he was chortling so much that the folding canvas chair wobbled and he nearly fell out.

"I'm glad you think it was funny," Jerome said sourly.

"Sorry." Bernard made a big effort to stop laughing and almost succeeded. *The dead*, he thought, *have feelings, too*. He struggled not to smile. "How did you get out from behind the grapes?"

"The cat."

"Of course. The cat. I might have known."

"Why," Jerome asked suspiciously, "did you ask if I could go where I wanted?"

"Oh, no reason. I just wondered."

"Was there somewhere in particular you wanted me to go to?"

Bernard took a deep breath. "Hillside Cottage."

"Ah."

"Just to see if, well, you know..."

And Jerome did know, for he had been keeping an eye on Fidelis and his new parishioner for a while before his death, and he still found the matter of interest. "Nuff said." He reflected for a moment. "Okay, I'll have a go. I can't guarantee I'll get there, though — not with my track record. I could get stuck anywhere en route. I might end up in a vase of flowers or a bookcase or a clock, or anywhere. Who knows?" He felt quite brave for agreeing to undertake this commission; he also felt nervous and a little foolish.

"Um, when will I see you again?" Bernard asked.

The two friars stared at each other, matching expressions of perplexity on their faces.

"I don't know," Jerome said. "You could try thinking about me, I suppose. I might just slip into the current."

"What current?"

"I'm not sure," Jerome admitted. "It's just something Quant said, something about currents of thought."

"Oh. Er, right. I'll think about you, then."

"And look at something," Jerome added.

"What sort of thing?"

"Well, I don't know." Jerome shrugged. "Something that you want me to come out of. Choose something sensible," he added, "in case I get trapped. Don't pick a thimble, for instance."

"I haven't got a thimble."

"Well, you know what I mean. Choose something of a reasonable size. A table or cupboard... something like that."

"Does size matter?" asked Bernard.

Jerome just looked at him.

"Okay. I'll stare at something and think of you."

"Make sure you concentrate. You've got to bring me all the way through. Keep your mind on it. That's important. That's where I go wrong, I think. I don't look hard enough. Or rather I do, when I start off, but then, well, something distracts me. It's difficult, you know."

"I'm sure it is," Bernard sympathized. "I think you're doing very well, Jerry."

"Do you really? You're not just saying that?"

"Of course not! I really do."

"Thanks!" Jerome beamed at him. Then his sunny expression changed to one of anxiety. "Well, I'd better be getting back, I suppose."

Bernard noticed the nervous glance Jerome gave him, and asked reluctantly, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"If you wouldn't mind looking at that tree?"

"Which tree?"

"This one." Jerome glided over the grass and stood in front of a gnarled apple trunk.

Bernard got out of his chair and stood near the tree, though he did not stand very close to Jerome. Jerome breathed deeply. "Right! Now, you look at the tree and I'll look at the tree, and with luck I'll disappear."

He turned away from Bernard and focused on the tree.

Bernard, too, stared hard at the tree trunk, concentrating as much as he could. The bark shimmered, and he found himself alone. Trembling slightly, he went back to his chair and flopped into it, nearly toppling it over.

As he struggled to stabilize it, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, a movement by the apple tree. At first, he thought that Jerome must have traveled only as far as the other side of the tree, then he saw a ginger, sinuous body slip into view around the side of the tree.

"Hello!" he said.

The cat strolled over, rubbed his head against the hem of Bernard's habit and jumped nimbly onto the friar's knee. As Bernard stroked the soft fur and listened to the animal purring, it occurred to him that Jerome's apparently successful getaway had probably had more to do with the cat's presence in the vicinity than with any skill on his or Jerome's part. "Did you come to lend a helping hand?" he asked.

The cat's front paws kneaded the fabric of his habit.

"My, I bet you've some tales to tell!"

The cat meowed and rippled his back beneath Bernard's touch.

"Hi, Leo!" Valentine said, as he passed the cat in the corridor.

The cat gave him a friendly glance and continued on to wherever he was going.

Valentine pushed open the kitchen door and found the room empty. He put a cup on the table, spooned coffee into it, tipped the coffee back into the coffee jar and put a teabag into his cup instead. He switched the kettle on and took the milk jug out of the fridge. He walked over to the side table, lifted up the film that covered a plate of biscuits, removed a couple of the biscuits and carefully smoothed down the film.

While he was waiting for the kettle to boil, he looked idly round the room, and his gaze fell on a brightly colored cereal packet standing on a worktop. A patch of blue denoting a summery sky attracted

his attention. It was a blue of cornflower intensity, and it seemed to Valentine that he had seen that same color recently, in another context.

As he was sitting at the table stirring his tea, he realized that he had in fact seen that very shade of blue in his own room only a short time earlier. Eyes of that color had looked out from the portrait on his wall, frightening him half to death — though even as he recalled his fear, he recalled also the startled expression he had glimpsed in the eyes, as if he had not been alone in experiencing a sense of shock.

He heard footsteps on the stone flags of the corridor, and Peter came into the kitchen.

When he saw Valentine, he pushed the door shut behind him. "Hi, I was wondering where you were." He, too, made himself a cup of tea, saw that Valentine was eating freshly baked biscuits, looked around, located the film-wrapped plate and also helped himself. "There won't be many left at this rate," he remarked, biting into one. "Mm, these are tasty. They've a sort of vanilla flavor, wouldn't you say?"

"Iggy's a good cook," Valentine agreed. "He's the best we've had. Jerry wasn't bad, but it was all a bit plain." As he spoke the name, he visualized the late friar busy in the kitchen, glancing up as people came in, and he had the impression of looking once more into the late brother's eyes, eyes of an unusually bright and pure blue. "My God!" he gasped. "It's Jerry, isn't it? It's Jerry who was in my picture looking out at me!" Somehow, the fact that he had put a name to the revenant seemed to make matters worse. He trembled with fear. "Jerry's come to haunt us."

Peter regarded him calmly. "No, I don't think he has."

"He's taken possession of my picture. He's come to haunt my picture."

Peter ate another biscuit.

"Well, he has, hasn't he?" Valentine said. "It's obvious. He's taken over my picture. He was looking out from it. His eyes were looking at me. You remember his eyes? They were so blue — as blue as that." He pointed to the patch of cornflower blue sky on the cereal packet. "It was him, all right. It was Jerry, no doubt about it. Jerry's haunting my picture."

"Maybe he is," Peter said, "maybe he isn't."

"I know what I saw," Valentine insisted crossly. "I saw Jerry's blue eyes looking out from my picture."

"I don't doubt it."

"You do. You just said..."

Peter held up his hand. "I don't doubt what you saw. What I doubt is whether Jerry's haunting your picture."

"But he was in it," Valentine said. "He took supernatural possession of it. If that's not haunting, I don't know what is."

Peter scratched his head. "I don't think he's haunting your picture... not specifically haunting it, I mean... not what you'd call really haunting it."

"Oh, what was he doing in it, then?"

"I think he might have been, well, just passing through."

"Just passing through?" Valentine stared at Peter as if he wasn't sure he had heard him correctly. "Jerry was just passing through my picture?" In a voice sharp with sarcasm, he asked, "Just passing through on his way to where?"

"Well, I don't know," Peter shrugged helplessly. "How should I know? Jerry's all over the place at the moment."

Valentine stared at him. "What?"

"Well, I don't know how it's happening, but I think Jerry's, well, on the move quite a bit. He doesn't seem to have quite settled down."

"Settled down?" Valentine echoed, incredulously. "He's dead, Pete!"

"I know he's dead," Peter said. "I saw him dead. I sat by his body. I went to his funeral. I saw him put into his grave. I said prayers over him. I know he's dead. But, well, maybe he's finding it a bit difficult to accept."

Valentine wiped a hand across his forehead. "What are you saying, Pete? Do you mean Jerry doesn't know he's dead?"

"Not exactly. I think he knows he's dead, all right, but, um, he's seems to be a bit mobile." Peter started on another biscuit.

"Where have you seen him?"

"In the graveyard."

Valentine shuddered. "Spooky!"

"It was, rather."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Well, he said he hadn't been expecting to see me."

"*He* hadn't been expecting to see *you*?"

"Quite!"

"Extraordinary!" Valentine shook his head in amazement. "Did he sound the same — the same as he used to?"

Peter nodded. "Exactly the same. He was just as he used to be. He had the same voice, the same face, the same eyes — the same blue eyes you saw in your picture."

Valentine leaned back in his chair. After a brief contemplation, he remarked thoughtfully, "Jerry said he was surprised to see you. Well, when he was in my picture he seemed surprised to see me. I was terrified, but he looked a bit shocked himself." He shook his head. "Well, well! You could be right. Maybe he's not really haunting my picture, not properly haunting it, the kind of haunting that needs exorcizing. Maybe he got into it by accident. He didn't seem to be expecting to be there."

Peter nodded. "I think he got in there by mistake."

"That would fit," Valentine agreed. "Perhaps he suddenly just found himself in the painting. When he realized where he was, he took himself out of it pretty fast."

It occurred to Peter that Jerome might indeed have taken himself out of the painting, or he might have been taken out of it, but he did not go into the matter, for he had no wish to bring a magical cat into the conversation.

"Well, well!" Valentine exclaimed again. "I can't get over it. Fancy Jerry coming back, like that!" He shook his head wonderingly. "Fancy you seeing him in the cemetery! You must have been terrified. Did he rise up out of his grave?"

"Something like that." Peter pushed back his chair and gathered up the empty cups.

Valentine did not pursue his questioning, assuming that Peter had found his ghostly experience in the graveyard too scary to want to recall it. He helped himself to another of Ignatius's biscuits on his way out.

Peter washed and dried the cups and put them back in the cupboard. He, too, then left the kitchen. In the corridor, he passed the cat sitting on a windowsill in the sunlight. He stopped and stroked the animal, nervously, experimentally, as if he half-expected his hand to pass through the creature. But the fur beneath his fingers was smooth and soft and the cat's back rippled beneath his caress. Gleaming green eyes looked at him. Then a shaft of sunlight must have caught them, for they changed momentarily to a deep gold, the richness of which overwhelmed him, making him feel quite light-headed.

Peter was trembling as he went up the staircase to his room. The ghosts of dead friars didn't frighten him half as much as the living presence of the friary cat did.

Chapter Eleven

Jerome walked slowly along the path, deep in thought. Though his eyes were cast down, he didn't notice the rich markings of the marble beneath his feet, for his attention was focused on the problem of how to get himself into Hillside Cottage without getting stuck on the way and having to call for help. Apart from the shame he would feel at having to be rescued yet again, he didn't want to have his whereabouts known to all and sundry on what was essentially a spying mission. Then it dawned on him that he was in all likelihood being watched at that very moment. Having had no privacy so far, he had no reason to expect any now.

He looked around uneasily. He seemed to be alone, but that meant nothing. The fact that he couldn't see anyone didn't mean he wasn't under surveillance. He imagined the friars chatting among themselves as they watched him. He looked along the ground to see if Quant might be around, ostensibly engaged in washing his paws but in fact scrutinizing his every move, but he could see no sign of him. Not that absence meant anything where Quant was concerned. The cat could be on another planet and still be checking him out. No, he had to accept that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, someone was likely to be keeping an eye on him.

Suddenly Jerome remembered how, in wintertime, he used to go into the friary garden to feed the birds. He always seemed to be alone but he knew that many pairs of eyes were trained on him, for as soon as he went back into the house birds fluttered down from the trees, as numerous as falling snowflakes, to snatch the food he'd scattered and to drink and bathe in the water he'd poured for them. They'd been watching out for him.

I'm under that kind of observation now. I probably always have been. And here I am, setting out to spy on Fidelis, when I'm an image myself on someone's retina.

Jerome wondered whether he shouldn't stay put and let Bernard do his own snooping, for Bernard lived in the same world as Fidelis: he didn't. Or did he? Jerome frowned as he tried to puzzle this one out. He glanced round for a handy bench to sit on and found one.

His eye followed the veined marble path until it disappeared into the wood. He fancied he heard the haunting notes of Pan's music floating through the air, music of such ethereal beauty that the stars in the heavens might dance to it. The leaves on the oaks on the far side of the path fluttered and rustled, and he wondered if the trees, too, were listening to the divine melodies.

Pan still plays to those who will hear him.

Jerome reflected on his changed view of time. Insofar as he had thought about time at all, it had been in terms of mealtimes and getting the dinner ready on time. Speculation about the nature of time had not been for him. Jerome's philosophy was an uncomplicated one: get on with the things that need doing and leave the thinking to others better equipped for the task — the scholars and Doctors of the Church, such as his namesake, the great St Jerome.

Jerome wondered if the saint had ever sat in his study, his devoted lion at his side, and tried to unravel the knotty problem of chronology. Suddenly he heard Quant's silvery laughter, and turned abruptly, but the cat was nowhere to be seen.

Jerome had never hitherto questioned the idea of the movement of time. Time moved forward. *Now* became *then*: it was as simple as that.

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
bears all its sons away;
they fly, forgotten, as a dream
dies at the opening day.*

But it isn't like that, is it? Time isn't a flowing river, bearing its sons — and its gods — away. Its sons and its gods might be forgotten, but to be forgotten isn't to die.

Jerome looked back towards the pillared room he had just left, then, once more, along the finely veined path that had led him to wonders that had shaken him to his soul. He had heard the sweet harmonies played by the great god of woods and wild places; he had met with friends from whom he had parted long ago, never expecting to meet them again — yet here they were. *They're all here, gods and men. They're still here.*

There's no time past and time to come. There's only time now. Everyone, everything, is here now, in the same world. Just because we don't see everyone, everything, that doesn't mean they're not here.

It's like being in a theater when the curtain's down. There's one lot of people on one side of the curtain and another lot of people on the other. They're all in the same theater at the same time, though the audience can't see the actors until the curtain goes up.

Or it's like being on the top of a mountain. If you're on the plain below, you can see only so much. From the mountain, you can see much more. It's the same scene you're looking at, but you're seeing more of it. You've got a different vantage point.

It's a question of seeing. It's a vision thing.

Jerome wondered what further sights awaited him. He recalled the shock that had electrified him when the centaurs had galloped into view. He had scarcely been able to believe his eyes. Who'd have thought he would see real, live centaurs? And they'd greeted Quant like old pals. The Hound of Heaven had been on friendly terms with the cat, too. Jerome wondered again about Quant, and remembered the surprise he had felt on seeing him bow reverentially before Pan's sacred grove. In this world of mysteries, perhaps Quant was the biggest mystery of all. In thinking about Quant, Jerome knew that he was trying to fathom the unfathomable. Quant was an enigma and was likely to remain so. Quant, essentially, belonged somewhere he did not have access to. Time and space were as one to the cat, and indeed he seemed to have no need of either in order to move about.

Again, Jerome thought of a theater, only now he visualized a theater with many stages, and it seemed to him that the cat was able to step from stage to stage, performing whatever role had been allotted to him. He pictured him appearing on one stage after another, acting out different roles. Then it occurred to him that, since time and space didn't seem to exist for Quant, maybe the cat was on all the stages simultaneously and that in fact the various stages were but different sections of one huge stage.

At this point, the idea of a theater got too big for him and Jerome felt his head begin to ache; he wiped his brow and tried to clear his mind. Thinking about Quant and where he fitted into the scheme of things — especially when he didn't know what the scheme of things was — was not good for him. He would make himself ill if he went on like this. Quant was way beyond his understanding, and he would only tangle his thoughts if he tried to understand him. It would better to concentrate on what he could comprehend. It would be sensible to stick with what he knew.

I know my Lord.

Jerome had lived his life in the service of his Lord and he knew that his Lord had come to help and guide him and his fellow men. For mankind, He had taken human form, taken on human characteristics. Jerome could identify with Him in His humanity. Jerome loved his Lord as man. For him, the Lord had put on a cloak of human flesh, a cloak that had cost Him dearly, for it was a cloak made of all the suffering in the world. And Jerome knew that his Lord still wore His cloak of suffering and he loved Him for it, and thanked Him for it, and worshipped the dazzling divinity that shone gloriously beneath the cloak. And because of his Lord's human cloak, Jerome felt that he could relate, in his limited way, to Him, and he felt that he could glimpse, though only darkly, the part his Lord was playing on His Father's stage.

What Quant's role was, Jerome had no idea. He felt that he was closer to understanding where his Lord fitted into His Father's divine plan than he was to understanding where the cat fitted in. The cat was old, so old that he seemed to predate everything in Jerome's imagining. His Lord was old, of course, as old as the Word itself, but his Lord was also new, bringing to His followers a new way, a new beginning, a new hope, a new life. For His followers, his Lord was old in His eternal majesty and new in His human dimension. But the cat, the cat was old and so... so different.

Jerome felt that the creature had as little affinity with the human race, as little a human dimension, as the six-winged seraphs that ceaselessly flew about the everlasting throne. A thought sparked deep inside Jerome's mind, but the spark did not catch.

Jerome closed his eyes and conjured up the image of the cat. When he had captured the image, he concentrated on it, remembering the sleek, tawny body slipping through the twilight shadows in the cloisters in the friary or sitting in the sunlight on a windowsill like a pet cat anywhere. But pet cats weren't like Quant. Pet cats didn't stroll through time and space, moving molecules aside as lightly as one might draw back a gauze curtain. What kind of pet could do that?

Jerome felt deeply in awe of the creature, and was frightened of him, as one might be frightened of something alien, unknowable. There was a remoteness about Quant that suggested that his loyalty lay far from his human companions. And yet, the cat was friendly enough. That was the strange thing. For all his essential differentness, he did seem to have a link with people. He got on with them. He hung about them, he stayed with them — almost as if he'd been sent to be around them... as a friend. Another image came to Jerome, of a lion sitting beside a saint on the desert sands, and again a spark glowed deep within his mind, but again it failed to catch.

Jerome pictured the cat sitting washing his paws in a patch of sunlight in the friary, and he smiled. The friars there would be amazed if they had the slightest inkling of the powers their little ginger cat possessed. For him, slipping through dimensions was easier than slipping through a cat flap. He looked at something, shoved a few atoms aside just by looking, and there he was — wherever he wanted to be. Jerome wondered suddenly if Quant actually needed to move anything aside in order to go places, and decided that he probably didn't. He doubted that the laws of physics, any physics, applied to Quant.

Then he made a determined effort to take his mind off the cat and his baffling abilities. He concentrated his thoughts on the friary, and he remembered an interesting thing. Years earlier — Jerome smiled as he realized that he was still thinking in terms of earthly ideas of time — he had sat with his former novice master, Father Flavian, while he lay dying. The old priest had told him that during the night he had seen the founder of their Order walking towards him along a white path, with his hands held out to him as if in greeting.

Jerome had thought at the time that Flavian had been dreaming but now he knew, with absolute certainty, that Flavian had been seeing. Their founder had approached Flavian, arms outstretched in welcome, ready to take him back. And Jerome heard once again the voice of his old granny, who never

talked of people dying but of 'going back.' Flavian had been going back, and the founder of his Order had been there in person to lead him.

Jerome wondered briefly why he hadn't received such a prestigious reception — or any reception at all, come to that. Then another picture came into his mind: the faces of his brethren whom he had seen at Angus's funeral. And he recalled the sense of shock he had experienced on realizing that his Order existed in death as much as in life; realizing that those who had been in the Order were still in it. He felt awestruck, overwhelmed, as he contemplated the true size of his beloved community.

Jerome had always thought of his Order as a family, but now he knew that it was a family that had lost none of its members. They were all still around and could be seen by those with eyes to see them. And he felt deeply ashamed as he thought of the number of times in his prayers on earth he had prayed to his dead brethren, asking them for their help and intercession, while never really believing that they were actually there. He had been mouthing words, just words, words as formalities with no substance, or so he'd thought at the time. He blushed to think that his brethren had been around him all the while, listening to him, watching him, reading him, reading his unbelief.

Oh God, he thought, and wanted to dig a hole and bury himself in it. He put his head in his hands and groaned. If only he'd known, if only he'd had more faith.

Deeply ashamed, he looked back at the cream stone building where he knew some of his brothers were. *Oh dear,* he thought, *they're probably watching me now. Well, they almost certainly are. There's no such thing as privacy here. But was there ever?*

Jerome twined his fingers together worriedly and slumped on his bench, wondering how he was going to face returning to the building to meet those same friars whose existence he had doubted and who had known of his doubts. He wondered whether he should apologize for thinking that they had not merely passed on but passed away. He decided against that and resolved to tough it out.

Just don't mention it. If I start apologizing, there'll be no end to it.

He straightened up. Deciding that he couldn't live his life under the shadow of the fear of constant surveillance, he set about planning how to get into Hillside Cottage.

Sure I'm being watched, but that's how it is, that's how things are, and I've just got to get on with my life. He smiled wryly.

As he tried to summon up the memory of the white-painted cottage on the hillside, he thought how difficult it would be to get into the place and how much easier it would be to let Bernard do his own spying, for that was how Jerome thought of it. And the circularity of his situation amused him, as he thought of himself trying to see what Fidelis was up to, while his own brethren watched him, with Egbert no doubt shaking his head in exasperation and coming out with some unflattering comment.

However, he had assured Bernard that he would try to get into the cottage, and besides it would be interesting to have a peek inside. Whether he would find Fidelis there when he got into the cottage — that was, if he didn't get stuck on the way — would be a matter of chance. He wondered what he would find if Fidelis was there, and hoped he wouldn't catch him in flagrante. While it would be quite fun to catch him in some minor misdemeanor, he didn't want to intrude on a passionate bedroom scene. Why, in those circumstances, he'd be little better than a voyeur.

Suddenly, what had looked like being a bit of fun appeared more doubtful, and he wondered whether to abandon his journey before even setting out. But then he would have to go back to Bernard and tell him he wasn't going through with it for reasons of propriety — assuming, that was, that he could find his way back to Bernard.

Jerome twined and untwined his fingers uneasily and wondered why he had agreed to take on the task. Fidelis's activities were really no concern of his. And how could he get into Hillside Cottage via a gateway in some item of furniture when he didn't know how the place was furnished? How could he

know what piece of furniture to focus on?

Worriedly bending his fingers into a cat's cradle, he reflected that maybe it would be for the best if he did get stuck en route. That way he could explain to Bernard that he'd tried, honestly he had, he'd tried and failed, and yet he wouldn't risk finding himself cast in the role of a not-very-nice type of chap in a not-very-nice type of situation; though, of course, if he did get stuck on the way he would have to be rescued, with all the embarrassment that would bring.

Jerome untangled his fingers, cupped them round his head, and wondered just what he thought he was doing. Here he was in this glorious place, with wonders all around him, wonders to blow his mind, and he was planning a silly bit of tomfoolery that he couldn't begin to justify in a month of Sundays. So, he had his suspicions about Fidelis. So, Bernard had his suspicions about Fidelis. So what? What was it to them? What Fidelis got up to was his business, not theirs, though admittedly it might be quite interesting to find out more.

Jerome thought hard, and concluded that there might be no great harm in just having a peep inside Hillside Cottage. After all, Fidelis might not be there. With luck, Fidelis wouldn't be there, and then he could go to Bernard and tell him that he'd done as he'd been asked, and that would be the end of it. And thereafter he would mind his own business and would tell Bernard to mind his.

So, he had to find some item of furniture in Hillside Cottage that would give him a gateway into the building. Well, he didn't know what was in the rooms, but there must be certain pieces he could be sure of finding: a table, chairs, a cooker, a fridge. What wouldn't he mind being stuck in, if the worst came to the worst?

Jerome discounted the cooker as it would be too hot if it was switched on, and the fridge as being too cold — he didn't want to come out covered in ice and looking like the abominable snowman — and wondered if there might be something around his own size where he might feel reasonably comfortable if things went wrong.

A grandfather clock? An old cottage would probably have one, and that should do nicely, provided the pendulum didn't knock him silly.

He suddenly heard Father Egbert's voice saying, "Knock a bit of sense into him, more like."

Jerome looked round sharply, but could see no one. He told himself that he must have imagined it. *It's my guilty conscience.* He wondered whether to abandon his planned trip, but wondered only briefly, and pressed on with his task, trying to call to mind the image of a tall, slim-cased clock. He managed to picture an old, oak case, inlaid, and a painted dial. But as he attempted to focus closely on the dial, it slipped away. He realized that the details were too fussy for him to retain in his memory, and he swapped it for a brass dial. This he found easier to deal with. His fists were clenched with the effort of his concentration now.

The image of the clock became clearer, sharper. The air shimmered, and Jerome found himself standing in a hallway, beside a staircase. He gasped and stretched out a hand to grip the stair rail. He clung to it, trying to stabilize himself. He shook his head, as if to clear it of confusion, then, cautiously, he surveyed the hall.

It was small and narrow. The staircase was steep and winding and cottagey; Jerome reckoned he must be in the right place, and congratulated himself. He loosened his grip on the stair rail and braced his legs to steady himself. He was relieved to find that he was standing the flowery carpet and not hovering a few inches above it.

I'm getting better at this.

He saw behind him a tall, slim grandfather clock with a marquetry case and a brass face that seemed to regard him with interest. He stared approvingly at it. It was a surprisingly elegant clock for its surroundings and he wondered if it might be an heirloom. His eye followed the pale, intricate

pattern on its case. He smiled with pleasure, both at the beauty of the thing and at his relief that he was standing in front of it, admiring it from the outside.

Then, abruptly, he turned away, fearing that his concentrated gaze might cause him to be whisked him back through the clock before he had had time to explore the cottage.

He saw that the doorway at the far end of the hall led into the kitchen, which appeared to be unoccupied. Of the two doors on his right, one was closed and the other was slightly ajar; he wondered if the gap might be narrow enough for him to slip through. Then he remembered that as a spirit — he tried not to think of himself as a ghost, for he did not feel there was anything spooky about himself — he should be able to pass right through the door into the room.

Not feeling confident about his ability to move molecules and pass unhindered through the door, he decided to try to squeeze through the gap. He tiptoed down the hall, realized he didn't need to, and put his feet down firmly. The gap was narrow, so he took a deep breath and carefully eased his form around the door. He had expected the room to be empty, for he had heard no sound coming from it, so he was surprised to find that there were two people in there. They were sitting at a dining table which was laid for tea.

The man had his back to Jerome, but he was wearing a friar's habit. Jerome recognized the build and the fair hair of his guardian, Fidelis. Opposite him sat the woman whose home this was. Jerome moved closer and saw that Fidelis's hands were resting on the table. The palms were pressed together.

The woman stretched out an arm and patted Fidelis's hands. Jerome walked further round the table and saw that the priest's eyes were closed. Fidelis looked as if he were just relaxing, but Jerome sensed that he was praying. This puzzled him, and it crossed his mind that the priest might be saying a prayer of contrition. But he pushed the thought away. This was an innocent scene of two people taking tea together; it was not for him to speculate on what might have happened earlier. Maybe Fidelis was simply saying a prayer in a quiet moment, for friars tended to pray when there wasn't much else happening.

Jerome saw the woman stop patting Fidelis's hands and grasp them firmly. He saw Fidelis wince, as if her grip were painful, and indeed it seemed to Jerome that her red-painted nails glistened on his skin like blobs of blood. Then she slackened her grasp and Fidelis's demeanor relaxed.

He gently shook his hands free and smiled. "I must be going now. I've got to get over to the convent." He pushed back his chair.

The woman pushed her chair away from the table, too. "Well, you'll see Emily before you go?"

Fidelis looked doubtful and glanced at his watch.

The woman rose, walked round the table and rested her hand briefly on his arm. "You'll say goodbye, at any rate? You could spare a moment, surely?"

Without waiting for her companion's answer, she moved quickly towards the door.

Jerome stepped swiftly aside.

"Emily!" the woman called. "Come and say goodbye to Father. He's leaving now."

Jerome heard a girl's voice shout, "Okay. I'll be with you in a tick."

Jerome stood in the shadow of a tall display cabinet filled with china. He could scarcely believe that neither of the two people in the room could see him. He felt conspicuous, exposed. He heard footsteps on the stairs, and a teenage girl entered the room. She was a pretty girl, with long, straight, reddish-gold hair that was parted in the middle and hung down on each side of her face. She was dressed in blue.

Fidelis advanced to meet her, holding out his hand. "How are you today, Emily?"

"Fine, Father, thank you," the girl replied politely, taking his hand. "I'm going back this evening, you know. Mum's taking me to the station."

"It's been lovely seeing you, my dear," Fidelis told her warmly.

"It was good to meet you, Father. Perhaps we'll meet again." Emily removed her hand from Fidelis's grasp and stepped back. "I'd better get on with my packing now." She glanced towards Jerome, and for a moment he thought she had spotted him, then he realized she was looking at the wall clock beside him. "Well, goodbye, Father."

Fidelis patted her head of shining hair. "Have a safe journey, dear, and God bless."

"Thank you, Father." Emily left the room and Jerome heard her clattering back up the stairs.

"I'd better be going myself now," Fidelis announced.

The woman stood aside for him, but he courteously waved her to precede him. As they moved down the hall, Jerome heard a few softly spoken words which he did not catch. Then the woman raised her voice slightly. "Well, goodbye, Father. Thanks for calling."

"It's been nice seeing you — and Emily, too, of course. Thanks for the tea. It was most welcome."

After the woman had closed the front door, she did not return to the dining room but went upstairs. Jerome heard her talking to her daughter in the room above him.

"Well," he said to himself, "there's not much there to interest Bernard."

He heard the grandfather clock chiming and imagined it was calling to him. *I'd better be getting back, too.*

He glided towards the door, went out into the hallway and stood in front of the clock.

"Right!" he said firmly.

He looked into the brass face, which glowed warmly in the afternoon sun. Nervously he clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, then he breathed deeply and stared fixedly at the case. At first nothing happened and Jerome found himself admiring the marquetry. He gathered his thoughts and refocused; now, he pictured a gateway opening before him. The inlaid pattern on the case blurred, the air shimmered and Jerome disappeared into the clock.

Chapter Twelve

Fidelis got out of his car, walked slowly across the yard and opened the kitchen door. Bernard and Ignatius were in the kitchen, the former seated at the table with a cup of coffee and a newspaper, the latter standing by the stove, stirring the steaming contents of a saucepan. On a mat in a corner lay the cat. Fidelis greeted his fellow friars but seemed distracted as he crossed the room; he appeared not to notice the cat.

When he had gone out, Ignatius remarked, "Well, he's got a load on his mind!"

Bernard shrugged and turned his attention back to his newspaper. After a moment, though, he glanced at the cat, who had his eyes shut and looked a picture of domestic feline contentment. Bernard smiled and resumed reading his paper.

Now, however, he found he couldn't concentrate, and his thoughts drifted to Jerome. He wondered how his late brother was getting on with his investigation and whether he'd be able to recall him to ask. He frowned at the thought of trying to summon a ghost and hoped he wasn't getting into the realm of the black arts. Then his expression relaxed, for he couldn't view Jerome as anything other than a beloved brother in faith who had passed on, if not quite passed away. He looked at the cat again and saw that the animal was watching him now. The green eyes flashed golden, a rich, deep gold of a brilliance that dazzled him. Then the eyes closed again and the cat appeared to doze off.

Bernard stirred uneasily in his chair. It wasn't his late brother who frightened him, with his apparent uncertainty about his present status and home, but the house pet, the cat who seemed to flit through dimensions as he pleased and who had powers that Bernard knew would scare him witless if he even tried to speculate about them. Yes, ignorance, the friar thought as he surveyed the homely bundle of ginger fur, is bliss. In the face of such awesome powers, it was better to accept humbly that certain things existed that were beyond his comprehension and to be grateful that such a magical creature seemed content to co-exist peaceably with him.

Suddenly he realized that Ignatius had said something to him. He looked up into the cook's questioning grey eyes.

"Another coffee? I'm going to boil the kettle again."

"Oh, er, no thanks." Bernard pushed back his chair and stood. "I've got things to do." He picked up his cup and saucer.

Ignatius took them from him. "I'll wash them up. I've got plenty more washing-up to do."

"I'll help you," Bernard offered.

"There's no need," Ignatius assured him. "I'm waiting for the oven anyway."

Back in his room, Bernard sat down in his armchair. He wondered where Jerome was, wondered if he might be in Hillside Cottage at that very moment. He tried to imagine the rooms inside the pretty, white-washed cottage, for he had never been into the property. He pictured a cozy, compact interior, with low, beamed ceilings and an old black range in the small kitchen.

He smiled as he realized that his visualization was probably idealistic; the cottage was almost certainly not as picturesque as he was imagining it to be. The interior had probably been gutted and modernized. Then he remembered that the previous occupant had lived there for many years, and he decided that his earlier picture might be accurate after all and that the cottage might be as quaint and old-fashioned on the inside as it was on the outside, for he had never heard of much work being done on the place.

Bernard's thoughts drifted across the hillside, past the friary and along to the oak-edged path where

he had unexpectedly encountered Jerome, and he homed in on the tree where the late brother had got himself trapped. Fancy meeting with a ghost — especially one stuck in tree! Who'd have thought it?

When he'd set out that afternoon, he'd had no idea what a momentous walk it would turn out to be. If he'd had the slightest inkling, he'd have run a mile in the opposite direction, or else stayed at home. Although, now that he'd got over the shock of the episode, he found it interesting in retrospect. It's not every day you meet up with a spirit in a tree.

At this point Bernard may have dozed off, for the leaves of the oak on which his inner eye had focused began to flutter rhythmically, as if they were dancing, and the trunk of the tree swayed sinuously, as if it were following a beat. He thought he heard music playing, faintly, in the distance. His inner ear strained to catch the melody, for he thought that it must be wonderful music if it made the trees dance.

Then Bernard saw with surprise that the line of oaks was not a single line, as he had always thought: it was the outer limit of a wood. *How strange! I've lived here all these years and never known there was a wood there.* He noticed a narrow track cutting its way through the undergrowth. *I didn't know that path was there, either.*

The path looked inviting and Bernard longed to walk along it but he found he couldn't move. He seemed to be rooted more firmly than the trees. It occurred to him that he might have dozed off and maybe was caught in some sort of sleep paralysis, but he did not think that he was asleep, for he felt intensely aware. His mind felt as sharp as a newly whetted knife, and his senses seemed as lively, as receptive, as they had been in his childhood. His keen hearing picked up the sounds of a distant whinny and of pounding hooves, and he looked forward to seeing the horses that would come galloping out of the wood. But the sound faded, as if the animals were on a different path.

Then his ear picked out a sound much closer, the sound of ferns and bracken being trodden on. He couldn't see anyone or anything, but he heard a snuffling, as if some creature were sniffing out a trail. The snuffling, which he found had a curiously gentle, comforting quality, as if it came from a animal not so much out hunting as out searching, grew louder, and he saw a huge black dog emerge from the undergrowth, its nose to the ground.

When the hound reached the path, it stopped in its tracks and turned and gazed at him. Bernard was not frightened, for there was in the creature's great golden eyes a warmth, a love, that made him want to get up from his seat and go to the animal. He wanted to put his arms around its smooth, strong neck. He wanted to stroke its shiny, silken coat. He thought it was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. But still he couldn't move.

The dog kept its shining eyes fixed on him, then it lowered its head and once more picked up the trail it had been following. It padded back amongst the trees and Bernard lost sight of it. He felt like crying at the loss of the creature. He closed his eyes and concentrated on trying to recall the image, but just when he thought he had recaptured the animal, its outline blurred and it dissolved into a mist.

When he opened his eyes again he found that the wood and the path and the wonderful creature that had crossed the path were gone. He was back in his room at the friary. But he felt disorientated as he looked at his familiar furniture and the old blue curtains fluttering at the open window, and it was not until his gaze came to rest on the crucifix pinned to the wall above his bed, adorned with the rosary that he had hung around the neck of his crucified Lord, that his thoughts settled and his head cleared.

So sharp and clear had been the image of the hound that, for a few destabilizing moments, the objects in his room had seemed insubstantial, shadowy in comparison, and he had the impression that he had returned to a dream world, leaving the real world behind. But the floor felt firm beneath his feet and the frame of his chair felt solid. He clutched the armrests to anchor himself.

I must have dozed off.

He shut his eyes again as he tried to remember the picture that had been so vivid and so beautiful, but, though he knew he had seen a dog crossing a path that ran through a wood, he couldn't bring to mind any detail, and he felt a sense of loss as that general outline grew hazy and slipped away. He hoped he would dream the same dream again.

Then he wondered where Jerome was and remembered that he was occupying the late friar's room. He felt that he ought to be afraid, knowing that his predecessor was out and about and liable to drop by at any moment, but somehow he didn't feel frightened. Jerome had never been a threatening person in life, so there seemed no reason why he should be frightening in death. Sure, he had been shocked by Jerome's return, for it wasn't every day that a dead friar springs from a tree, but Jerome in death gave every appearance of being the mild-mannered, sweet-tempered chap he had always been. In fact, with Jerome's reappearance, he felt much as if a friend had returned. Jerome had changed surprisingly little. He was a bit paler... a bit transparent... but otherwise much the same.

And he was still interested in friary affairs.

Bernard smiled as he appreciated the aptness of the word he had used: affairs.

Presumably Fidelis was engaged in an affair. Nothing else seemed to explain his frequent visits to Hillside Cottage, and his jumpiness. Fidelis was edgy, nervy, jittery. He'd had affairs before, though they'd been hushed up when they'd been discovered, and he had been moved to another house in another part of the country, or even to another country. But despite his failure to keep his vow of chastity, he had never embarrassed the Order.

And Fidelis wasn't the only one not to have kept his vows. Everyone had frailties. They were all human. And that was what Bernard liked about his Order. It was an understanding kind of Order, a forgiving kind of Order, an Order that recognized that while everyone tried to live by the rules, not all succeeded.

It occurred to Bernard that Jerome had probably come as close as anyone to keeping the rules. The humblest of friars, he had lived a life of poverty and chastity, and he had generally been obedient. And asking for nothing, he had received plenty, for people had always been turning up at the friary door with gifts for him. There had been something about Jerome, something about his simplicity, that people had responded to. He had been an old-fashioned sort of friar, relying on people's charity, though never seeking it. A bit of a one-off, really, in this day and age. He would have been suited to being a mendicant friar in the old days, or even a hermit. Bernard pictured Jerome as he might have been had he lived long ago, existing contentedly in a cave somewhere, living on food brought by well-wishers, no doubt sharing it with some wild creature. Bernard smiled at the image, then his thoughts slipped forward to a more recent past, and he remembered Jerome sitting in the garden with the cat at his feet. A thought stirred deep in his mind and he struggled to pull it to the surface but it sank back and was gone.

His gaze traveled idly round his room and came to rest on his bookcase. He decided to do a bit of reading and was about to get out of his chair to fetch a book when he noticed that there was something strange about the bookcase. He stared at it, puzzled. It looked as if it were wriggling, though he knew it couldn't be. Then it seemed to bulge, then he heard a plopping sound, then he saw Jerome standing in front of him.

The friar was panting, but he beamed at Bernard. "I made it!" he declared proudly. "I did it! I got here!" He looked as pleased as a child managing his first steps.

"Well done!" Bernard said, a little unsteadily.

"Thanks." Jerome beamed again. "It's the first time I've managed to get back on my own." Then he looked sharply at Bernard. "Unless you were helping?"

"Oh, I wasn't," Bernard assured him. "You got here under your own steam."

Jerome looked relieved. "Oh, good. I must be getting the hang of it. It isn't easy, you know."

"So you said. Say, I've just had the most wonderful dream."

"You have?"

"It was amazing. I was sitting by this path, by a wood."

Jerome stared at him.

"And this dog came by."

Jerome's mouth dropped open. He glanced round, then glided to the table and sat on the edge. He looked shaken. "Er, what was he like, this dog?"

"He was black. Huge. He should have been terrifying, but somehow he wasn't. He was... quite friendly, actually."

"Really?" Jerome said weakly.

"Yes. He looked quite gentle. And, oh, Jerry, he stopped and looked at me, and his eyes... his eyes... they were full of... warmth and love."

"Really?" Jerome said again, faintly.

"I can't describe it," Bernard said. "It was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. It must have been a dream, but it was like a dream of heaven."

"Really?" Jerome's voice was barely above a whisper now.

Bernard closed his eyes, as if he were trying to recapture the image. Then, briskly, he asked, "Well, how did you get on?"

He stared at his companion, who seemed to be having difficulty focusing. For a moment he thought Jerome had become a bit paler, a bit more transparent, as if he might be about to fade away. He certainly looked like a spirit whose thoughts were elsewhere.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

Jerome's cornflower blue eyes sharpened and regarded Bernard steadily.

Bernard had the feeling that they held a message for him, but if they did, he could not read it.

The moment passed, and Jerome asked lightly, "You mean, how did I get on at Hillside Cottage?"

Bernard nodded.

"There's not much to report," Jerome told him. "I got inside okay. I came out by a clock in the hall. It was a very nice clock, actually. It seemed to be quite... sympathetic."

"Sympathetic?"

"It sounds funny, I know, but that was how it felt at the time." Jerome was silent for a moment. "I expect you'll think I'm nuts, but the clock seemed to be, well, alive, in some way, as if it was taking an interest in things." Evidently noticing Bernard's baffled expression, he laughed, embarrassed, and waved a bony hand. "Okay, I'm nuts!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"You wouldn't?"

"No. Imaginative, perhaps. Nuts, no."

"Well, thanks!" Jerome grinned. "But seriously, there did seem to be something about the clock."

"You mean it had some sort of life force? Like there was a spirit in the clock?"

"Well, yes, something like that. But maybe I was imagining things. My nerves were on edge. It's very stressful, you know, coming and going like this. Well, it is for me, at any rate, never knowing if I'll quite make it — in either direction."

Jerome's emphasis on his inadequacy as traveler between the worlds of the living and the dead made Bernard wonder if there might be other, more seasoned travelers about, journeying back and forth. However, he decided that if there were, he didn't want to know — not yet, anyway.

"Go on with what you were saying about the clock," he said.

Jerome shrugged in a self-conscious way. He gave the impression of someone who was regretting

having started a particular topic of conversation. "Well," he went on reluctantly, "it seemed to be... sort of... aware of what was going on." He gave a shamefaced half-smile.

"You mean, it was conscious of things?"

"Well, that's how it seemed to me. But I expect I was wrong. I was all hyped up after the journey, like I said. It was probably a trick of the light."

"Mmm." Bernard sucked his lips together thoughtfully. "That's interesting. How did you say you got here?"

"I didn't, but it has to do with the displacement of molecules, or something like that. At least, I think it does."

"Mmm," Bernard said again. He looked around his room, at his chest of drawers, at his wardrobe, at his bookcase, at the table Jerome was sitting on — and wondered, in passing, how Jerome, insubstantial as he was, managed to sit on a table without going through it. He ran a hand over the fabric of the chair he was sitting on. "These things in this room are made of molecules."

"I suppose so," Jerome agreed. "I was never much a scientist myself."

"Me neither," said Bernard. "But let's look at it logically. If you can disperse molecules to get back here after you've, er, gone away, then molecules can move around, obviously."

Jerome nodded.

"So," Bernard continued, "if molecules can move around, maybe they're moving round all over the place."

"Er, maybe so."

"Things are made of molecules."

"Yes."

"People are made of molecules."

Jerome nodded slowly. He had a faint idea of where Bernard's thought process was leading.

"Everything's made of molecules."

Jerome nodded again.

"Everything's made of the same molecules," Bernard said.

Jerome regarded him thoughtfully. "So, you're saying that the clock in Hillside Cottage is made of the same molecules as you and me."

"Well, the same molecules as me, at any rate. I'm not sure about you."

Jerome was put out at this. He looked hurt.

"Well, hang it all, Jerry," Bernard said. "You're dead. Who knows what you're made of?"

Jerome was silent for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Good point!" His expression brightened. "So, you're saying that things are conscious in a way, because they're made of molecules like you, and you're conscious."

"Well, it's possible, I suppose," Bernard said. "Logically, it seems possible."

"So what you're saying is, maybe all things have the same kind of... um, er," Jerome struggled to find a suitable word, "spirit... beingness... because they're all made of the same molecules, even if they're not things that we'd call *alive* in the normal sense. The same kind of beingness might be spread through everything."

"Well, it might be."

"What are molecules exactly?"

"I don't know," Bernard confessed. "They're obviously very tiny, whatever they are."

"I expect you can see them through a microscope," Jerome said.

"I expect so," Bernard agreed, adding, "I wish I'd paid a bit more attention in physics at school. Or would it have been chemistry?"

"Search me!" Jerome shrugged again. "Are you saying things can think... in a way?"

"Well, no," Bernard said. "No, not really, not in the way we think of thinking. Not in the sitting down and working problems out kind of way — not that furniture would have problems, of course. Oh, I don't know, though. A clock might stop and that would be a problem — for the clock, I mean. But if it did stop, it wouldn't be able to work out how to get itself going again. I suppose it might be aware that it had stopped, though." He shook his head. "No, surely not." He waved a hand dismissively. "This is all getting rather silly."

All the same, he glanced around his room and thought that he would never view his furniture in quite the same light again. Maybe, just maybe, it might have some kind of primitive, general sense of awareness. And besides, who was to say where its molecules might have come from — or, rather, whom?

For a moment he felt spooked, and he realized, with a shock, that it was not by the ghost sitting on his table but by the table itself. He grasped the armrest of his chair to steady himself and wondered whose molecules he might be holding onto or sitting on. He resolved to treat his chair with more respect in future, in case he might be sitting on molecules from someone who had been really important. A flood of possibilities surged through his mind, panicking him. He felt light-headed and realized he needed to get a grip on his thoughts, lest they run away with him.

Resolutely, he stood and took a few steps, putting his feet down as firmly as he could without stamping. He walked round to the back of his chair and leaned on it, facing Jerome. In as forceful a voice as he could manage, he asked, "So, what did you see in the cottage?"

"Nothing much," Jerome replied. "I came out into the hall, like I said, and I went into a dining room. The door was open a bit, so I went in. Fidelis was there, sitting at the table, having a cup of tea with the woman. He left just after I got there."

"He didn't see you?" Bernard asked.

"Nope."

"Funny, that. But I can see you quite clearly." Bernard regarded the deceased friar.

"Yes, but you're meant to be able to see me."

"Yes, but why?"

"I haven't a clue. It's something to do with the cat, I think. Well, it's bound to be something to do with the cat. Most things are to do with the cat, in my experience — my late experience, that is."

Bernard nodded. "He's one helluva cat." He gasped and looked dismayed. "Oh, God, what have I said? I didn't mean it like that." He clasped his hands together and wrung them tightly.

Jerome gave an uneasy laugh.

There was an uncomfortable silence, during which Bernard appeared to be saying a quick prayer.

"So, that was about it, really — at the cottage, I mean," Jerome said. "They were having a cup of tea and then Fidelis left."

"Oh." Bernard sounded disappointed.

Jerome smiled, amused at the expression on his friend's face. His bright blue eyes sparkled. "Yup, it was all quite innocent. They were sitting at the table, then he got up to go."

"Well, there's not much scandal there, then." Bernard gave a theatrical sigh. "I do enjoy a good scandal."

Jerome shook his head and laughed, remembering what gossips the friars had been in his days at the friary. The cackles round the table at mealtimes had sometimes made the refectory sound more like a chicken coop than a dining room.

"Nope," Jerome said, "there was nothing going on there, as far as I could see. Oh, the woman had her daughter staying with her, and she came down to say goodbye to Fidelis before he left."

"I didn't even know there was a daughter," Bernard commented.

"She's a pretty girl, with nice long hair. I suppose she's a student somewhere, or maybe she lives with her father, wherever he is."

"Well," Bernard said, "it looks like we've been barking up the wrong tree."

"I think so," Jerome agreed. "Though," he added, "with the girl there..."

"You mean, they'd have to behave themselves?"

"Well, they would, wouldn't they? There didn't seem to be anything going on anyway, though."

"Perhaps you could call there another time?" Bernard suggested hopefully.

Jerome did not reply.

"Er, will you be calling back here?" Bernard asked hesitantly.

"I could do, I suppose," Jerome said. "I could try, anyway. I seem to be getting better at this traveling lark. I'll get my wings soon, at this rate. I'll be throwing my L-plates away."

Taking this to be a joke, Bernard laughed. Once more, though, he felt uneasy. Jerome with L-plates implied that there were more experienced travelers flitting around. He looked about him, wondering if there might be others in the room. He could be in the middle of a crowd, for all he knew. He couldn't spot anyone else, but that didn't mean there wasn't anyone there. "Are you on your own?" he asked Jerome.

"Of course I'm on my own. You can see I am."

"I mean, really on your own? I mean, there's no one else here that I can't see?"

"Ah, I'm with you now!" Jerome's bright blue eyes searched the room. "Nope, there's no one else here. There's no one I can see anyway."

"Oh, good," Bernard said, relieved. He was puzzled by Jerome's last sentence, though. It sounded as if Jerome was indicating that his spirit eyes could see only so far. Bernard had assumed that Jerome would be able to see whatever was around to be seen. Now, he wondered if there might be varying degrees of sight in the afterworld. It occurred to him that one might have to learn to see in the spirit world, just as, apparently, one had to learn to travel. Maybe Jerome was learning how to see, just as he was learning how to travel.

He pursued this interesting idea, only turning aside from it when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a sudden movement to his left. Turning, he saw that the cat had joined them. Knowing that the door to his room was firmly shut and that the cat had simply materialized, he stared at the little ginger animal with awe and fear.

While he could cope with a dead friar returning to his old home, he wasn't sure that he could cope with a magical cat. Jerome as a ghost was a known quantity. The cat was not a known quantity: he was a total mystery.

Bernard felt he was better acquainted with his Lord than he was with the cat. His Lord was a mystery, of course, but He was a human kind of mystery — a mystery in human form, at any rate. He was a divine mystery, of course, but a divine mystery with a human aspect. But the cat was, well, different, strange.

Bernard couldn't begin to guess where the cat fitted into the order of things. He felt he knew nothing about the creature. He didn't know what he was, he didn't know where he came from, he didn't know where he truly belonged. He shivered a little, as he watched the animal do a faultless impersonation of a contented domestic pet as it arched its back, stood daintily on the tips of its paws, and rubbed against the hem of Jerome's robe. He watched Jerome respond to the cat's show of affection by smiling, getting up from his perch on the table and leaning down to stroke the animal.

Bernard regarded this homely scene in silence, with his hands clasped together so tightly that his knuckles were white. He was unnerved, not by the sight of a dead friar stroking a cat, but by his

realization that he didn't have the slightest idea whether the cat was alive or dead, whether he lived in his world or in Jerome's. The creature seemed to be both dead and not dead.

Bernard knew he was a flesh-and-blood cat because he'd stroked him many a time himself, and, dammit, he fed him often enough and poured out milk for him to lap up. But flesh-and-blood cats, cats that were just flesh-and blood, didn't appear out of thin air. This was a flesh-and-blood cat *plus*. Plus what? Bernard didn't know: he didn't have a clue.

As if aware of the turmoil in the friar's mind, the cat turned and regarded Bernard. A golden light shone from his eyes. Gently, he slipped away from Jerome and padded over to Bernard. He stood beside him and looked up at him. The gold was gone from his eyes now and they gleamed green. They were the eyes of an earthly cat. Quant gave an encouraging, inviting meow, and Bernard took the hint and bent and stroked the animal. His hand passed over fur that was as smooth as silk and he felt the animal's back ripple beneath his touch.

Quant seemed to smile as if to say, "Yes, I'm real, am I not?"

Then suddenly there was nothing beneath Bernard's hand. The cat was no longer there. So quickly and unexpectedly had he vanished that Bernard found his hand poised in mid-air, hovering over nothingness. He gasped with shock, then gave a nervous laugh. He heard an answering meow, a mocking meow, though where the meow came from he could not tell.

Startled, he looked at Jerome, who was smiling. On legs that had suddenly turned to jelly, he tottered around his chair and slumped into it.

"Quant can be a bit unsettling, can't he?" Jerome said sympathetically.

"Quant... Leo... what is he?"

Jerome threw his hands up. "Ah, there you have me! I've no more idea than you have."

"But you must have. You're in spirit now. You're with him in the spirit world."

"Well, yes, but..."

"But what?" Bernard asked.

Jerome hesitated before answering obliquely, "Quant's a cat of many lives — many, many lives."

While Bernard tried to work out what he meant by this, Jerome added, in a tone of finality, "The cat's as much a mystery to me as he is to you, Bernie — maybe more so." He glided over to the bookcase from which he had emerged. As he held up a hand in a gesture of farewell, Bernard saw that his fingers were crossed.

"Here goes!" Jerome announced, in a slightly wavering voice. "I'll see you." He turned to face the bookcase, leaned forward as if he were studying the title of a particular volume, breathed deeply and vanished.

"See you," Bernard said, just as shakily. He wondered how much more he could take.

Clare Kesteven opened the door of Hillside Cottage on her return from the station. It had been nice having Emily to stay. She was glad her daughter had liked the cottage: her bright little bedroom with its beamed ceiling and gingham-curtained window looking out along the garden path, the old-fashioned kitchen with its black-leaded range still in place, the cozy rooms downstairs, even the stone outbuildings that still housed an ancient privy and a disused stable and hayloft. She had greeted it all with delight and had said she looked forward to spending her next school holiday there, even talking of bringing a friend to stay.

Clare's heart was light as she walked down the hallway. She glanced happily at the beaming face and gleaming case of the grandfather clock caught in a ray of sunshine as she passed by. It was a relief to know that Emily approved of her new home. What would she have done if the girl had given it the thumbs-down?

She would have moved on, she supposed. She would have done it for Emily's sake, but she wouldn't have wanted to. It was lovely here. It was a lovely spot and a lovely house — just the kind of cottage she had always dreamed of living in, and indeed it seemed to have been waiting for her. It had felt right the first time she had come to look at it. It was amazing how it had been available like that — up for rent just at the time she had found out where John was. She had lost track of his whereabouts.

He had been moved several times within his Order. He had even been sent abroad to the missions. Then she'd heard, quite by chance, that he was here. She hadn't come here with any particular intention of getting in touch with him again, and she'd certainly not been expecting to resume the relationship they'd once had. She'd just wanted to see where he was — call it curiosity.

She had driven up during Emily's term-time, had located the friary, had booked into an inn nearby — The Old Mill, a quaint little place with a magnificent hanging sign that looked as if it might have been painted by Constable — and had pottered round for a few days. Driving down the lanes, she had chanced upon this cottage up for letting. She'd arranged a viewing, more for the sake of something to do than anything else, and had been enchanted the minute she'd set foot inside the door. The house had seemed to welcome her. She'd had the strange feeling that it had wanted her to live there, that it had been... awaiting her. It was as if she had been meant to drive past it that day. And the funny thing was that the lease had been about to expire on the house she was then living in.

The coincidence in the timing had been quite breathtaking. She had never intended, when she'd taken off in the car with her suitcase in the trunk, to pay more than a passing visit to this part of the country. But the cottage had practically plonked down itself in front of her. It had been empty and unlet — though for the life of her she couldn't see why, for it was such a pretty little place that she'd have expected it to have been snapped up long ago. It was as if things had been meant to come together like that. Even as she'd looked around the place, she'd known that her furniture would fit in and would suit.

Everything had come together like a jigsaw as the final piece is slotted in. The picture was complete, and everyone was happy. She was happy, Emily was happy, and John was happy. He'd seemed pleased to see her again. They were now friends and not lovers. But circumstances had changed. Their lives had changed, and what had once been was now no more than a fond memory. There was no point in trying to resurrect the past: it was something to be remembered, not resuscitated.

Thoughts of the Past.

Clare smiled as she pictured the postcard she'd bought long ago and had given to John when they'd met again. They had once seen a poster of that particular painting when they'd been together, and John had commented on how closely she resembled the girl in it. Emily looked like that now.

Later, spotting a postcard of the painting, she had bought it for old time's sake. She had given John the card as a souvenir of what had once been and would never be again. They had been lovers once. Now they were friends, friends with memories.

John — no, she must think of him as Fidelis — had been surprised, well, gobsmacked really, when she'd taken the card out of her handbag, had written a message on it, using his real name — the name he'd obviously not used for years — and had handed it to him as a gift. Old name, old times, past times. He had been really touched by it, she could tell. He had tucked it away in his habit and she had known from the expression on his face that he would treasure it, keep it safe. It would be a souvenir he would value.

He had settled down now, accepting the priestly celibacy he had signed up to, but he could have his memories, all the same. And in a way, the love they'd shared hadn't been bad. It had been — she searched for a word — inappropriate. But that was how love was sometimes: it was inappropriate. You didn't choose to love people. Sometimes love just happens, and it had happened to them. It wasn't as if

he had had other affairs — she knew there had only been her. She had been his one earthly love.

Now John's love was focused elsewhere, and it was a milder emotion that bound them together. They had a mutual affection and that was enough for her, as it clearly was for him.

Clare smiled as she went to switch the kettle on. Everything in her world was right: right for her, right for John, right for Emily. And John had been so tactful, so diplomatic about Emily, never asking who her father was. And she had not told him — she had not had the heart to tell him — that Emily was the result of a fling she had had with her boss when she'd been on the rebound after her affair with John had been brought to an end when he'd been sent to another of his Order's houses.

She had quite understood that it had been orders from above, that he'd been needed elsewhere, but it had been tough for her, all the same. She had felt lonely, and James hadn't been getting on well with his wife, and well, one thing had led to another: to Emily, in fact. And James, though he'd stayed with his wife, had always provided for his daughter — on the quiet, of course. He had been very generous, and Emily hadn't wanted for anything.

Not that Emily knew about her father. She had always believed her parents had been planning to marry before her birth, but that her father had been killed in an accident and that her mother, devastated by her loss, had moved away and lost touch with those who would have been her in-laws. Emily had accepted the story, and it had become established fact in her eyes.

John was in the dark as to the identity of the girl's father, and would remain so. Neither he nor Emily knew the truth, and neither ever would. It was better that way. Fortunately, John — Fidelis, she *must* think of him as Fidelis now — seemed to have struck up a rapport with Emily. They'd got on well together. That was nice.

Clare made her tea, opened the back door to let the sunlight in, and sat contently at the kitchen table.

Father Fidelis sat at his desk in his study. He appeared to be staring out the window, but, in reality, he saw neither the leaves fluttering on the lacework of branches outside, nor the passing figure of Father Valentine clutching a sheaf of sketching paper. The only image he saw was that of a slim girl dressed in blue: the girl he had said goodbye to at Hillside Cottage, a girl who looked much as her mother had looked long ago, before the wistful vulnerability that had so charmed him had aged into something much less attractive.

Fidelis sighed as he recalled the soft sweetness of the long-haired girl who had caught his eye and captured his heart all those years ago. He frowned distastefully as he studied with his mind's eye the face of the bitter, hard-bitten woman who had turned up out of the blue — he smiled wryly at his choice of phrase, remembering how blue had suited her, as it now suited her daughter — to haunt him. Haunt?

That was hardly the right word. There was nothing ghostly, nothing insubstantial, about her. Clare was real enough, all too real, damn her, a real figure from a real past, a past he'd thought was dead and gone. Now the past had suddenly been resuscitated, and had come to threaten his present and his future.

Everything about Clare menaced him, from the grip of her scarlet-taloned hands on the sleeve of his habit as she greeted him at the back of the church at the end of Mass, to the soft insistence in her voice as she addressed him, so deferentially, so reverentially, as "Father." "Father" this, "Father" that. He got the message. "Father" had more than one meaning. But could she prove he was the girl's father?

Yes, presumably, if she called for a DNA test. She hadn't done that yet. Obviously, she was holding that little test in reserve in case he didn't prove amenable to... to what? What exactly did she have in mind? What did she want from him?

She hadn't said yet. It couldn't be money. He didn't have any — she knew that. It had to be sex, didn't it? She wanted a resumption of their relationship.

Obviously she did, since she'd made a point of giving him that postcard, the one he'd been stupid enough to drop while out walking.

Thoughts of the Past.

Well, as far as he was concerned, the past was staying in the past. Luckily, there'd been nothing on the card to link him with it. She'd written his own name, John. Nobody in the friary thought of him as John anymore. Everyone knew him as Fidelis. He'd taken the name when he'd joined the Order, and his own name had gradually stopped being used. He doubted if anyone in the friary even remembered it.

Valentine hadn't picked up on it, or he might have said something. As far as Valentine was concerned, he'd just picked up a postcard some rambler had dropped. With luck, the card would stay among the papers in his room and no more notice would be taken of it. With more luck, it would be thrown away after a while, and that would be the end of it.

Keep cool. Keep cool and do nothing. Don't try to get the card back.

To try to get it back would draw attention to it. Suspicions might be aroused, old memories awakened, old names remembered. It would be wiser to do nothing. Let the card stay where it was — it was doing no harm there. Let sleeping dogs lie.

Fidelis clasped his hands together. It was all so annoying to have this happen now. Just when he'd finally started to live up to his vows, she'd had to turn up. What was he going to do about her?

Well, he wasn't taking up with her again, whatever plans she might have! So they'd once had something going. But that had been then. This was now. Things had changed. He'd changed. For pretty well the first time since entering the Order, he was keeping faithfully to his vows, living up to the name he'd taken. Why had she had to come back on the scene now, of all times?

Oh God, the irony of it! The timing of it!

Fidelis groaned and wrung his hands in despair. What was he going to do about her? It just wasn't fair. He'd given up the sins of the flesh, so she could forget any ideas she might have in that direction. He was as chaste as chaste could be, and that was how he was staying. He was over the worst and was accepting celibacy.

Actually, he found it quite enjoyable, in its own way. It had pleasures of its own. Well, perhaps not pleasures, but certainly compensations. You became more focused, you got to see things better. It was as if the picture had cleared. Looking back, he could see that it had been blurred before, fuzzy, though he hadn't realized it at the time. No, he wasn't going back to that.

But what to do to keep out of her clutches?

He saw in his mind's eye the long, slim fingers and curving red talons laid, oh so lightly, on the sleeve of his habit, and he shuddered. She wanted him back, no mistake. And he was powerless against her.

Fidelis bowed his head and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he noticed his missal in front of him, the gold crucifix on the cover shining against its black leather background. Was he powerless? Suddenly he didn't think so.

Pray.

He had a problem. He needed help. Well, ask for help from the One who could help!

Fidelis clasped his hands together, but this time there was purpose, decisiveness, in the gesture. He would offer it up to his Lord and would pray for forgiveness. He'd sinned. He was sorry he'd sinned. He was truly sorry he'd sinned and he wanted a way out of his problems. He would make an act of contrition and pray that his Lord might help him in his time of trial. He'd pray that his Lord might free

him from this ghastly situation; pray that He might turn aside this woman who was hounding him; pray that she would be led to show mercy on him and leave him alone. His Lord could turn the hound aside if He chose to; he would pray that He would.

As the sunlight shone through his window, Fidelis felt his mood lighten and brighten. Feeling more positive than he had done for some time, he got out of his chair, went to his table, took up his prayer book and left his room. He headed towards the cloisters that led to the friars' private chapel. There was no time like the present. He would make his act of contrition now.

As Fidelis walked down the corridor, the friary cat stepped from the shadows and watched him. The creature's shadow was much, much bigger than seemed appropriate for the small, neat form that stood looking after the friar. It seemed to be that of a much larger cat, one that had a bushy mane around his head and neck, and a tuft at the end of his gently swishing tail. The eyes that gazed after Fidelis were a deep, rich gold.

Afterword

I began to write **Jerome and the Seraph** when I was living in an old stone house on a Welsh hillside, with views of a distant mountain range and the nearby coast. It was a picturesque location and I thought that it would make a good setting for a story. I decided to try writing a novel. I had written a lot of non-fiction, having been a freelance features writer for several years. I had also written a pure research M.Phil. thesis on the links between the novelist Wilkie Collins and the art scene of his day. While I was preparing to write a chapter on Perception, I read a fascinating book on quantum physics and was struck by the story of Schrödinger's Cat, which was potentially dead and not dead. The dead and not-dead cat seemed to be a good character for my story.

I thought of Albrecht Dürer's painting *St Jerome in the Wilderness*, and it seemed to me that St Jerome's lion might metamorphose into a much smaller and very special kind of cat. Indeed the saint himself might reappear in another guise. This set me thinking about creating a community of friars and making their home a gray stone building on a hillside, within sight of the sea. The friars run a parish and are pretty free to roam, so they have plenty of contact with people outside their Order. Among their number are a former artist, Father Valentine, and a former professional chef, Brother Ignatius. Ignatius has been sent to the friary as cook to replace the late Brother Jerome, who had an unfortunate accident in the friary cemetery. Brother Jerome, however, is still around, as is his pet cat of uncertain status. Valentine has a particular interest in Pre-Raphaelite art, and this interest of his enabled me to bring into my story one or two nineteenth-century paintings. Indeed one particular painting plays a role in the plot.

I had difficulty initially in settling on my main character, for it seemed clear to me that it should be one of the friars. Then, thinking about St Jerome and cats large and small, I realized that the principal character in my story must be the cat. And so, from Schrödinger's Cat I developed a creature which, though looking like a little ginger tomcat, has mysterious powers and an alter ego as a lion. In his true form, Quant is a seraph.

I am fond of characters — well, some characters — from classical mythology, and I decided to bring one or two of them into my story. Thus, Sibylla, the seaside fortune-teller, is the Sibyl of Cumae reincarnated. The Sibyl appears in her original form in the sequel, when Jerome explores the classical world some more.

Author Bio

Robina Williams lives in north-west England, near Liverpool. She has an M.A. in Modern Languages from Oxford University and an M.Phil. in English Literature from Liverpool University. Her research thesis traced the influence of nineteenth-century art on the writings of Wilkie Collins.

She has been a schoolteacher, college lecturer, secretary, computer data clerk, and freelance features writer for newspapers and magazines. She has a grown-up son.

Jerome and the Seraph is her first novel. She has now completed a sequel, **Angelos**, and is currently writing a third book in her Quantum Cat series. Paintings feature in the plots of both **Jerome and the Seraph** and **Angelos**.

Robina's web site: <http://www.robinawilliams.com>

Addendum

Author's Notes

Saint Jerome

Monk and Doctor of the Church, who lived from 331-420 AD. St Jerome spent several years as a hermit in the Syrian desert, but is not regarded as one of the Desert Fathers. Brother Jerome in my story is named after the saint, and is in fact a reincarnation of him, although Brother Jerome himself doesn't realize this.

The Seraphim

Six-winged angels who stand by the heavenly throne. In Isaiah 6, the prophet describes his vision of the seraphim.

Schrödinger's Cat

Erwin Schrödinger, 1887-1961. Austrian theoretical physicist. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1933 for his work with quantum and wave mechanics. The quantum paradox of Schrödinger's Cat is that the theoretical cat in a box exists in two states: it is both alive and dead at the same time. So my quantum cat is both alive and dead. Quant lives with the present-day friars in their friary, but also exists in the afterworld, and accompanies his friend, Brother Jerome, on his adventures there. Quant has been friends with Jerome for a long time, for, as a big cat, he was the lion who kept St Jerome company in the desert; now, as a little ginger tomcat, he continues to keep a protective eye on the saint in his new incarnation as Brother Jerome. Quant, in his true form, is a seraph: so the cat, the lion and the seraph are one and the same.

The Cheshire Cat

The Cheshire Cat features in Lewis Carroll's story, *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice first sees the cat in the Duchess's house. It seems to be a very happy cat, for it is "sitting on the hearth and grinning from ear to ear." A few minutes later it is grinning at her from the bough of a tree. The Cat answers Alice's questions, vanishing in-between-times. Alice finds this disconcerting.

'All right,' said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!'

Lewis Carroll (his real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) lived from 1832-1898; *Alice in Wonderland* was published in 1865. He was born in the Cheshire (UK) village of Daresbury, where his father was curate; there is a stained glass window in the church there depicting characters from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The village is a few miles from my home.

The Hound of Heaven

The Hound of Heaven, a poem by the English Victorian poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907), was published in 1893. This beautiful poem begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him...

Francis Thompson lived from 1893-1897 in a cottage belonging to the monastery in North Wales that gave me my setting for *Jerome and the Seraph*. He began training for the Roman Catholic priesthood but then switched his studies to medicine, although he did not complete them. *The Hound of Heaven* was much acclaimed in its day.

Paintings

Thoughts of the Past, Sir John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (Pre-Raphaelite painter, 1829-1908). The wistful, pretty, sandy-haired, blue-clad girl in this painting gave me the model for Claire Kesteven and her daughter Emily. Painted in oil on canvas in 1859, *Thoughts of the Past* hangs in the Tate Gallery, London.

St Jerome in the Wilderness, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). This charming picture, in oil on a panel, was painted in 1495 and hangs in the National Gallery, London. It gave me the idea for reincarnating St Jerome and for giving Schrödinger's Cat an alter ego as a lion. I have at home a beautiful Victorian oil painting of a majestic old lion. Looking at this wonderful lion every day, and thinking of Dürer's lion sitting beside the saint on the desert sands, helped to crystallize my thoughts: I realized that the quantum cat and the lion could be one — and could also, perhaps, be the seraph in my story, on a mission to protect the servant of the Lord.

Our English Coasts (also known as *Strayed Sheep*), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Painted in oil on canvas in 1852, *Our English Coasts* hangs in the Tate Gallery, London. A study in color and shade, it shows the effect of sunlight dappling the fleeces of the strayed sheep and the grass of the clifftop.

A Mill at Gillingham, also known as *Parham's Mill*, John Constable (1776-1837). Painted in oil on canvas in 1826, it hangs in the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT, USA. This picture depicts a quintessentially "old English" scene, with its quaint watermill and picturesque water-wheel; the warm browns of the tiles and wood contrast with the white froth of the tumbling water.

Napoleon Crossing the Alps, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Painted in oil on canvas in 1802, this celebrated painting hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria. The magnificent rearing white charger inspired Valentine to paint his inn-sign for The White Horse.

I hope you'll read the articles on my website, www.robinawilliams.com, to see how these paintings feature in my story, and how St Jerome's lion and Erwin Schrödinger's quantum cat are united as one mystical — and seraphical — creature: Quant, the central character in *Jerome and the Seraph*.

Deities

Apollo is the twin brother of Artemis, and the son of Zeus and the Titan Leto. Fleeing the wrath of Zeus' wife, Hera, the pregnant Leto roamed the earth until eventually the floating island of Delos offered her a refuge where she might give birth to her babies. For Leto's comfort, Zeus fastened the island to the seabed with chains of adamantine.

Pan is the god of pastures, woods and wild places, the god of goats and flocks and shepherds. He is represented with a goat's horns and feet, and is said to play the harmony of the spheres on his seven-reed shepherd's pipe.

Hecate is the great goddess of the underworld, and was companion to Persephone after her abduction by Hades. Hecate is also the goddess of crossroads and her approach is heralded by the howling of dogs.

The Sibyl of Cumae, Priestess of Apollo.

Sibylla, the clairvoyant in my story, is a reincarnation of Deiphobe, the Sibyl of Cumae. Deiphobe appears in her own form in *Angelos*, the sequel to *Jerome and the Seraph*. The Sibyl was granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo. The god also granted her the long life she desired: when he asked her to name the gift she would like, she pointed to a pile of dust swept up on the floor and asked that she might live the same number of years as the number of grains of dust in the pile. She forgot to ask to retain her youth, though. The Sibyl grew older and older and more and more shriveled until eventually she became so tiny that she was kept in a jar; finally all that remained of her was her voice and she continued to prophesy from the jar. I hope you'll read *Angelos* and meet Deiphobe again, as Apollo's priestess in Cumae.

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