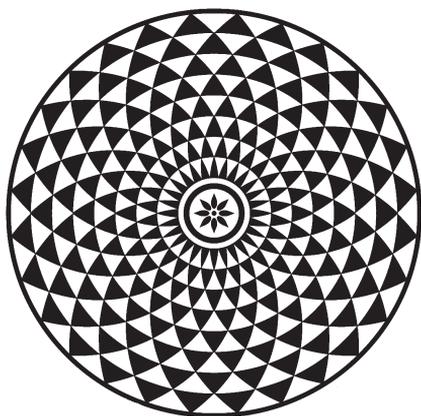


THE LIBRARY AT
MOUNT CHAR



SCOTT HAWKINS



CROWN PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Crown Publishers,
an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,
a division of Random House LLC,
a Penguin Random House Company, New York.
www.crownpublishing.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[CIP data]

ISBN 978-0-553-41860-6
eBook ISBN 978-0-553-41861-3

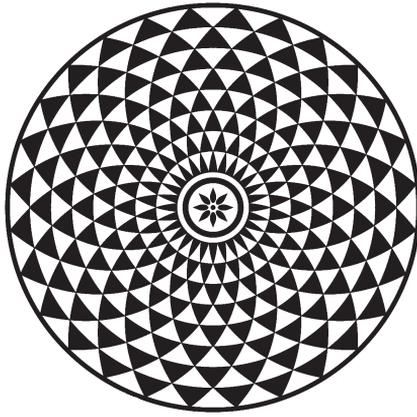
Printed in the United States of America

Jacket design by
Jacket photography

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

PART I



THE LIBRARY AT
GARRISON OAKS

Chapter 1

Sunrise

I

Carolyn, blood-drenched and barefoot, walked alone down the two-lane stretch of blacktop that the Americans called Highway 78. Most of the librarians, Carolyn included, had come to think of this road as the Path of Tacos, so-called in honor of a Mexican joint they snuck out to sometimes. *The guacamole*, she remembered, *is really good*. Her stomach rumbled. Oak leaves, reddish-orange and delightfully crunchy, crackled underfoot as she walked. Her breath puffed white in the predawn air. The obsidian knife she had used to murder Detective Miner lay nestled in the small of her back, sharp and secret.

She was smiling.

Cars were scarce but not unheard-of on this road. Over the course of her night's walk she had seen five of them. The one braking to a halt now, a battered Ford F-250, was the third that had stopped to take a closer look. The driver pulled to the opposite shoulder, gravel crunching, and idled there. When the window came down she smelled chewing tobacco, old grease, and hay. A white-haired man sat behind the wheel. Next to him, a German shepherd eyed her suspiciously from the passenger seat.

Ahhh, crap. She didn't want to hurt them.

"Jesus," he said. "Was there an accident?" His voice was warm with concern—the real kind, not the predator's fake that the last man had tried. She heard this and knew the old man was seeing her as a father might see his daughter. She relaxed a little.

“Nope,” she said, eyeing the dog. “Nothing like that. Just a mess at the barn. One of the horses.” There was no barn, no horse. But she knew from the smell of the man that he would be sympathetic to animals, and that he would understand their business could be bloody. “Rough delivery, for me and for her.” She smiled ruefully and held her hands to frame her torso, the green silk now black and stiff with Detective Miner’s blood. “I ruined my dress.”

“Try a little club soddy,” the man said dryly. The dog growled a little. “Hush up, Buddy.”

She wasn’t clear on what “club soddy” was, but she could tell from his tone that this was a joke. *Not the laugh-out-loud sort, the commiserating sort.* She snorted. “I’ll do that.”

“The horse OK?” Real concern again.

“Yeah, she’s fine. The colt, too. Long night, though. Just taking a walk to clear my head.”

“Barefoot?”

She shrugged. “They grow ’em tough around here.” This part was true.

“You want a lift?”

“Nah. Thanks, though. My Father’s place is over that way, not far.” That was true too.

“Which, over by the post office?”

“It’s in Garrison Oaks.”

The old man’s eyes went distant for a moment, trying to remember how he knew that name. He thought about it for a while, then gave up. Carolyn might have told him that he could drive by Garrison Oaks four times a day every day for a thousand years and still not remember it, but she didn’t.

“Ohhh . . .” the old guy said vaguely. “Right.” He glanced at her legs in a way that wasn’t particularly fatherly. “Sure you don’t want a lift? Buddy don’t mind, do ya?” He patted the fat dog in the seat next to him. Buddy only watched, his brown eyes feral and suspicious.

“I’m good. Still clearing my head. Thanks, though.” She stretched her face into something like a smile.

“Sure thing.”

The old man put his truck into gear and drove on, bathing her in a warm cloud of diesel fumes.

She stood watching until his taillights disappeared around a curve. *That's enough socializing for one night, I think.* She scrambled up the bluff and slipped into the woods. The moon was still up, still full. Americans called this time of year "October" or, sometimes, "Autumn," but the Librarians reckoned time by the heavens. Tonight was the seventh moon, which is the moon of black lament. Under its light the shadows of bare branches flashed across her scars.

A mile or so later she came to the hollow tree where she had stashed her robe. She shook the bark out of it and picked it clean as best she could. She saved a scrap of the bloody dress for David and tossed the rest, then wrapped herself in the robe, pulling the hood over her head. She had been fond of the dress—silk felt good—but the rough cotton of the robe comforted her. It was familiar, and all she really cared to know of clothing.

She set out deeper into the forest. The stones under the leaves and pine straw felt right against the soles of her feet, scratching an itch she hadn't known she felt. *Just around the next ridge,* she thought. *Garrison Oaks.* She wanted to burn the whole place to ashes but, at the same time, it would be kind of nice to see it again.

Home.

II

Carolyn and the rest were not born librarians. Once upon a time—it seemed long ago—they had been very American indeed. She remembered that, a little—there was something called *The Bionic Woman* and another something called Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. But one summer day when Carolyn was about eight, Father's enemies moved against him. Father survived, as did Carolyn and a handful of other children. Their parents did not.

She remembered the way Father's voice came to her through black smoke that smelled like melting asphalt, how the deep crater where their houses had been glowed dull orange behind him as he spoke.

“You are Pelapi now,” Father said. “It is an old word. It means something like ‘librarian’ and something like ‘pupil.’ I will take you into my house. I will raise you in the old ways, as I myself was raised. I will teach you the things I have learned.”

He did not ask what they wanted.

Carolyn, not ungrateful, did her best at first. Her mom and dad were gone, gone. She understood that. Father was all that she had now, and at first it seemed that he didn’t ask so much. Father’s home was different, though. Instead of candy and television there were shadows and ancient books, handwritten on thick parchment. They came to understand that Father had lived for a very long time. More, over the course of this long life, he had mastered the crafting of wonders. He could call down lightning, or stop time. Stones spoke to him by name. The theory and practice of these crafts were organized into twelve catalogs—one for each child, as it happened. All he asked was that they be diligent about their studies.

Carolyn’s first clue as to what this actually meant came a few weeks later. She was studying at one of the lamplit kiosks scattered here and there around the jade floor of the Library. Margaret, then aged about nine, sprinted out from the towering, shadowy shelves of the gray catalog. She was shrieking. Blind with terror, she tripped over an end table and skidded to a stop almost at Carolyn’s feet. Carolyn motioned her under her desk to hide.

Margaret trembled in the shadows for ten minutes or so. Carolyn hissed questions at her, but she wouldn’t speak, perhaps could not. But Margaret’s tears were streaked with blood, and when Father pulled her back into the stacks she wet herself. That was answer enough. Carolyn sometimes thought of how the hot ammonia of Margaret’s urine blended with the dusty smell of old books, how her screams echoed down the stacks. It was in that moment that she first began to understand.

Carolyn’s own catalog was more dull than terrifying. Father assigned her to the study of languages, and for almost a year she waded through her primers faithfully. But the routine bored her. In the first summer of her training, when she was nine years old, she went to Father and stamped her foot. “No more!” she said. “I have read enough books. I know enough words. I want to be outside.”

The other children cringed back from the look on Father's face. As promised, he was raising them as he himself had been raised. Most of them—Carolyn included—already had a few scars.

But even though his face clouded, this time he did not hit her. Instead, after a moment, he said, "Oh? Very well."

Father unlocked the front door of the Library and led her out into the sunshine and blue sky for the first time in months. Carolyn was delighted, all the more so when Father walked out of the neighborhood and down to the woods. On the way she saw David, whose catalog was murder and war, swinging a knife around in the field at the end of the road. Michael, who was training to be Father's ambassador to beasts, balanced on a branch in a tree nearby, conferring with a family of squirrels. Carolyn waved at them both. Father stopped at the shore of the small lake behind the neighborhood. Carolyn, fairly quivering with delight, splashed bare-foot in the shallows and snatched at tadpoles.

From the shore Father called out the doe Isha, who had recently given birth. Isha and her fawn, called Asha, came as commanded, of course. They began their audience by swearing loyalty to Father with great sincerity and at some length. Carolyn ignored that part. By now she was thoroughly bored with people groveling to Father. Anyway, deer talk was hard.

When the formalities were out of the way Father commanded Isha to instruct Carolyn alongside her own fawn. He was careful to use small words so that Carolyn would understand.

Isha was reluctant at first. Red deer have a dozen words for grace, and none of them applied to Carolyn's human feet, so large and clumsy when seen next to the delicate hooves of Asha and the other fawns. But Isha was loyal to Nobununga, who was Emperor of these forests, and thus loyal in turn to Father. Also she wasn't stupid. She voiced no objection.

All that summer Carolyn studied with the red deer of the valley. It was the last gentle time of her life, and perhaps the happiest as well. Under Isha's instruction she ran with increasing skill through the footpaths of the lower forest, bounded over the fallen moss oak, knelt to nibble sweet clover and sip morning dew. Carolyn's own mom had been dead about a year at that point. Her only friend was banished. Father was many things,

none of them gentle. So when, on the first frosty night of the year, Isha called Carolyn over to lie with her and her child for warmth, something broke open inside her. She did not weep or otherwise show weakness—that was not in her nature—but she took Isha into her heart wholly and completely.

Not long after, winter announced itself with a terrible thunderstorm. Carolyn was not afraid of such things, but with each flash of lightning Isha and Asha trembled. The three of them were a family now. They took shelter together beneath a stand of beech, where Carolyn and Isha held Asha between them, cuddling to keep her warm. They lay together all that night. Carolyn felt their slight bodies tremble, felt them jerk with each crack of thunder. She tried to comfort them with caresses, but they flinched at her touch. As the night wore on she searched her memory of Father's lessons for words that might comfort them—"don't worry" would be enough, or "it will be over soon" or "there will be clover in the morning."

But Carolyn had been a poor student. Try as she might, she could find no words.

Shortly before dawn Carolyn felt Isha jerk and drum her hooves against the earth, kicking away the fallen leaves to expose the black loam below. A moment later the rain flowing over Carolyn's body ran warm, and the taste of it was salty in her mouth.

The lightning cracked then, and Carolyn saw David. He was above her, standing on a branch some thirty feet away, grinning. From his left hand dangled the weighted end of a fine silver chain. Not wanting to, Carolyn used the last light of the moon to trace the length of that chain. When lightning flashed again, Carolyn stared into the lifeless eye of Isha, spitted with her fawn at the end of David's spear. Carolyn stretched her hand out to touch the bronze handle protruding from the deer's torso. The metal was warm. It trembled slightly under her fingertips, magnifying the faint, fading vibrations of Isha's gentle heart.

"Father said to watch and listen," David said. "If you had found the words, I was supposed to let them live." He jerked the chain back to himself then, unpinning them. "Father says it's time to come home," he said,

coiling the chain with deft, practiced motions. “It’s time for your real studies to begin.” He disappeared back into the storm.

Carolyn rose and stood alone in the dark, both in that moment and ever after.

III

Now, a quarter century later, Carolyn knelt on all fours behind the base of a fallen pine, peeping through a thick stand of holly. If she angled her head just so, she had an unobstructed view down the hill to the clearing of the bull. It was twenty yards or so wide and mostly empty. The only features of note were the bull itself and the granite cairn of Margaret’s grave. The bull, a hollow bronze cast slightly larger than life, stood in the clearing’s precise center. It shone mellow and golden in the summer sun.

The clearing was bounded on the near side by the stand of wild cedar in which Carolyn now hid. On the far side, David and Michael stood at the edge of a sheer drop-off cut into the hill to make a little more room for Highway 78. Across the road, twenty feet or so below, the weathered wooden sign marking the entrance to Garrison Oaks hung from a rusty chain. When the breeze caught it right you could hear the creak all the way up here.

Carolyn had snuck in very close indeed, close enough to count the shaggy, twining braids of Michael’s blond dreadlocks, close enough to hear the buzz of flies around David’s head. David was amusing himself by quizzing Michael about his travels. Seeing this, Carolyn winced. Michael’s catalog was animals, and he had learned it perhaps a bit too well. Human speech was difficult for him now, even painful—especially when he was fresh out of the woods. Worse, he lacked guile.

Emily had visited the librarians’ dreams the night before, saying that David required them to assemble at the bull “before sundown.” That was different from “as soon as possible,” a distinction that no one but Michael would overlook. Still, it might be for the best. Jennifer had been stuck

alone with David for weeks, the two of them waiting on news of Father. Now, as David tormented Michael, Jennifer—the smallest and slightest of the librarians—worked at tearing down Margaret’s grave. She trudged back and forth across the clearing, stooped over from the weight of head-sized chunks of granite, her strawberry-blond hair drenched in sweat. Still, after weeks alone with David, lugging granite in the hot sun was probably a relief.

Mentally, Carolyn sighed. *I suppose I should go down there and help them.* If nothing else, this would encourage David to divide his attentions among three victims rather than two.

But Carolyn did not lack guile. She would listen first.

David and Michael stood looking down over Garrison Oaks. Michael, like his cougars around him, was naked. David wore an Israeli Army flak jacket and a lavender tutu, crusty with blood. The flak jacket was his. The tutu was from the closet of Mrs. McGillicutty’s son. This was at least partly Carolyn’s fault.

When it became clear that they could not return to the Library, at least not in the near term, Carolyn had explained to the others that they would need to wear American clothes in order to blend in. They nodded, not really understanding, and set about rummaging through Mrs. McGillicutty’s closets. David chose the tutu because it was the closest thing he could find to his usual loin cloth. Carolyn thought about explaining why this was not “blending in,” then decided against it. She had learned to take her giggles where she could find them.

Her nose wrinkled. The wind smelled of rot. *Is Margaret back as well?* But no, she realized, the rot was David. After a while you didn’t notice so much, but she had been away. Flies buzzed around his head in a cloud.

A year or two ago, David took up the practice of squeezing blood from the hearts of his victims into his hair. He was a furry man and any one heart yielded only a few tablespoons, but of course they added up quickly. Over time, the combination of hair and blood hardened into something like a helmet. Once, curious, she asked Peter how strong this would be. Peter, whose catalog included mathematics and engineering, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. “Pretty strong,” he said meditatively. “Clotted blood is harder than you’d think, but it’s brittle.

The strands of hair would tend to alleviate that. It's the same principle as rebar in concrete. Hmm." He bent to his pad and scribbled numbers for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Pretty strong. It would probably stop a twenty-two. Maybe even a nine-millimeter." For a while David had dripped it into his beard as well, but Father made him chisel this off when it became difficult to turn his head. All that was left was a longish Fu Manchu mustache.

"Where were you?" David demanded, shaking Michael by the shoulders. He spoke in Pelapi, which bore no resemblance at all to English, or any other modern language. "You've been off playing in the woods, haven't you? You finished up weeks ago! Don't lie to me!"

Michael was close to panic—his eyes rolled wildly, and he spoke in fits and starts, conjuring the words with great effort. "I was . . . uh-way."

"Uh-way? Uh-way? You mean *away*? Away where?"

"I was with . . . with . . . the small things. Father *said*. Father said to study the ways of the humble and the small."

"Father wanted him to learn about mice," Jennifer translated, calling over her shoulder, grunting at the weight of her rock. "How they move. Hiding and the like."

"Back to work!" David screamed at her. "You're wasting daylight!"

Jennifer plodded back to the pile and hoisted another rock, groaning under the load. David, six-foot-four and very muscular, tracked this with his eyes. Carolyn thought he smiled slightly. Then, turning back to Michael: "Gah. Mice, of all things." He shook his head. "You know, I wouldn't have thought it possible, but you might be even more useless than Carolyn."

Carolyn, safe in her hiding blind, made a rude gesture.

Jennifer dropped another rock into the underbrush with a dry crash. She straightened up, panting, and wiped her forehead with a trembling hand.

"Carolyn? What? I . . . not know . . . I . . ."

"Stop talking," David said. "So, let me get this straight—while the rest of us have been killing ourselves trying to find Father, you were off playing with a bunch of *mice*?"

"Mice . . . yes. I thought—"

A flat crack rang out across the clearing. Carolyn, who had long experience of David's slaps, winced again. *He leaned into that one.*

"I did not ask what you *thought*," David said. "Animals don't *think*. Isn't that what you want to be, Michael? An animal? Come to that, isn't it what you actually are?"

"As you say," Michael said softly.

David's back was to her, but Carolyn could picture his face clearly. He would be smiling, at least a bit. *If the slap drew blood, perhaps he'll be giving us a look at his dimples as well.*

"Just . . . shut up. You're giving me a headache. Go help Jennifer or something."

One of Michael's cougars rumbled. Michael interrupted it with a low yowl, and it went silent.

Carolyn's eyes narrowed. Behind David, she saw from the grasses on the western edge of the valley that the wind was shifting. In a moment the three of them would be downwind of *her*, rather than vice versa. In her time among the Americans Carolyn had gotten acclimated to the extent that their smells—Marlboro, Chanel, Vidal Sassoon—no longer made her eyes water, but Michael and David had not. With the wind coming from the west she would not stay hidden long.

She took the risk of staring directly at their eyes—Isha had taught her that to do so was to invite notice, but sometimes it was unavoidable. Now she was hoping for them to be distracted by something north of her. Sure enough, after a moment Michael's glance was drawn to a moth fluttering to a landing on the cairn. David and the cougars followed his gaze, as predators will do. Carolyn took advantage of the moment to slip back into the underbrush.

She circled down the hill, south and east. When she was a quarter mile distant she doubled back, this time walking without any particular caution, and announced her arrival by purposefully cracking a dry twig underfoot.

"Ah," David said. "Carolyn. You're louder and clumsier than ever. You'll be a real American soon. I heard you blundering up all the way from the bottom of the hill. Come here."

Carolyn did as she was told.

David peered into her eyes, brushed her cheek gently. His fingers were black with clotted blood. “In Father’s absence, each of us must be mindful of security. The burden of caution is upon us all. You do understand?”

“Of cour—”

Still stroking her cheek, he punched her in the solar plexus with his other hand. She had been expecting this—well, this or something like it—but still the air whooshed out of her lungs. She didn’t go to her knees, though. *At least there’s that*, she thought, savoring the coppery taste of her hate.

David studied her for a moment with his killer’s eyes. Seeing no hint of rebellion, he nodded and turned away. “Go help them with the cairn.”

She forced herself to draw a deep breath. A moment later the fog around the corners of her vision cleared. She walked over to Margaret’s cairn. Dry autumn grasses brushed against her bare legs. A truck roared by on Highway 78, the sound muffled by the trees. “Hello, Jen,” she said. “Hello, Michael. How long has she been dead?”

Michael didn’t speak, but when he came near he gave her neck an affectionate sniff. She sniffed back, as was polite.

“Hello, Carolyn,” Jennifer said.

Jennifer dropped the stone she carried into the underbrush and wiped the sweat from her brow. “She’s been down since the last full moon.” Her eyes were very bloodshot. “So, that’s what? About two weeks now.”

Actually, it was closer to four weeks. *She’s stoned again*, Carolyn thought, frowning a little. Then, more charitably, *But who could blame her? She’s been alone with David*. All she said was, “Wow. That’s quite a bit longer than usual. What’s she doing?”

Jennifer gave her an odd look. “Looking for Father, of course. What did you think?”

Carolyn shrugged. “You never know.” Just as Michael spent most of his time with animals, Margaret was most comfortable with the dead. “Any luck?”

“We’ll see shortly,” Jennifer said, and looked pointedly at the pile of rock. Carolyn, taking the hint, walked over to the pile and hefted a medium-sized stone. They worked in silence with quick, practiced efficiency. With the three of them at it, it wasn’t long before the pile was

gone, scattered throughout the surrounding underbrush. The ground beneath it had sunk only a little since the burial. It was still relatively soft. They squatted down on their knees and dug at it with their hands. Six inches down, the smell of Margaret's body was thick. Carolyn, who hadn't done this in some time, stifled a gag. She was careful to make sure David didn't see. When the hole was about two feet deep she touched something squishy. "Got her," she said.

Michael helped brush away the dirt. Margaret was bloated, purple, rotting. The sockets of her eyes boiled with maggots. Jennifer hoisted herself out of the grave and went to gather her things. As soon as Margaret's face and hands were uncovered, Carolyn and Michael wasted no time getting out of the pit.

Jennifer took a little silver pipe out of her bag, lit it with a match, and took a deep hit. Then, with a sigh, she hopped down and began her work. Stoned or not, she was very gifted. A year ago Father had paid her the ultimate compliment, surrendering the white sash of healing to her. She, not Father, was now the master of her catalog. She was the only one of them he had honored in this way.

This time the murder wound was a vertical trench in Margaret's heart, precisely the width and depth of David's knife. Jennifer straddled the corpse and laid her hand over the wound. She held it there for the span of three breaths. Carolyn watched this with interest, noting the stages at which Jennifer said *mind*, *body*, and *spirit* under her breath. Carolyn was careful to give no outward sign of what she was doing. Studying outside your catalog was—well, it wasn't something you wanted to be caught at.

Michael moved to the other side of the clearing, away from the smell, and wrestled with his cougars, smiling. He paid the rest of them no attention. Carolyn sat with her back against one of the bull's bronze legs, close enough to watch as Jennifer worked. When Jennifer took her hand away the wound in Margaret's chest was gone.

Jennifer stood up in the grave. Carolyn guessed this was to get a bit of fresh air rather than for any clinical purpose. The stench was bad enough over where Carolyn was, but in the pit it would be overwhelming. Jennifer took a deep breath, then knelt again. She furrowed her brow, brushed

away most of the insects, then knelt and put her warm mouth over Margaret's cold one. She held the embrace for three breaths, then drew back, gagging, and set about rubbing various lotions on Margaret's skin. Interestingly, she applied the lotion in patterns, the glyphs of written Pelapi—first *ambition*, then *perception*, and finally *regret*.

When that was done, Jennifer stood up and scrambled out of the grave. She started toward Carolyn and Michael, but after two steps her eyes widened. She cupped her hand over her mouth, bolted into the underbrush, and retched. When her stomach was empty she walked over to join Carolyn. Her steps were slower and shakier than before. A thin film of sweat glistened on her brow.

"Bad?" Carolyn asked.

By way of answer Jennifer turned her head and spat. She sat down close and laid her head on Carolyn's shoulder for a moment. Then she fished out her little silver pipe—American, a gift from Carolyn—and fired it up again. Marijuana smoke, thick and sweet, filled the clearing. She offered it to Carolyn.

"No thanks."

Jennifer shrugged, then took a second, deeper drag. The coal of the pipe flared in the polished bronze of the bull's belly. "Sometimes I wonder . . ."

"Wonder what?"

"If we should bother. Looking for Father, I mean."

Carolyn drew back. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I—" Jennifer sighed. "No. Maybe. I don't know. It's just . . . I wonder. Would it really be that much worse? If we just . . . let it go? Let the Duke, or whoever, take over?"

"If the Duke repairs himself to the point where he can start feeding again, complex life will be history. It wouldn't take long, either. Five years, probably. Maybe ten."

"Yeah, I know." Jennifer fired up her pipe again. "So instead we have Father. The Duke . . . well, at least his way would be painless. Peaceful, even."

Carolyn made a sour face, then smiled. "Had a rough couple of weeks with David, did you?"

“No, that isn’t—” Jennifer said. “Well, maybe. It actually *was* a pretty goddamn rough couple of weeks, now that you mention it. And where have you been, anyway? I could have used your help.”

Carolyn patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry. Here, give me that.” Jennifer passed the pipe. She took a small puff.

“Still, though,” Jennifer said. “Doesn’t it ever get to you? Serious question.”

“What?”

Jennifer waved her arm, a gesture that took in the grave, Garrison Oaks, the bull. “All of it.”

Carolyn thought about it for a minute. “No. Not really. Not anymore.” She looked at Jennifer’s hair and picked a maggot out. It squirmed on the end of her finger. “It used to, but I adjusted.” She crushed the maggot. “You can adjust to almost anything.”

“You can, maybe.” She took the pipe back. “I sometimes think the two of us are the only ones who are still sane.”

It crossed Carolyn’s mind to pat Jennifer’s shoulder or hug her or something, but she decided against it. The conversation was already more touchy-feely than she was really comfortable with. Instead, by way of changing the subject, she nodded in the direction of the grave. “How long will it be before . . . ?”

“I’m not sure,” Jennifer said. “Probably a while. She’s never been down this long before.” She grimaced and spat again. “Blech.”

“Here,” Carolyn said. “I brought you something.” She rummaged in her plastic shopping bag and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Listerine.

Jennifer took the bottle. “What is it?”

“Put some in your mouth and swish it around. Don’t swallow it. After a few seconds spit it out.”

Jennifer looked at it, dubious, trying to decide if she were being made fun of.

“Trust me,” Carolyn said.

Jennifer hesitated for a moment, then took a sip. Her eyes went wide.

“Swish it around,” Carolyn said and demonstrated by puffing out first her left cheek, then her right. Jennifer mimicked her. “Now, spit it out.” Jennifer did. “Better?”

“Wow!” Jennifer said. “That’s—” She looked over her shoulder at David. He wasn’t looking, but she lowered her voice anyway. “That’s amazing. It usually takes me hours to get the taste out of my mouth!”

“I know,” Carolyn said. “It’s an American thing. It’s called mouth-wash.”

Jennifer ran her fingers over the label for a moment, an expression of childlike wonder on her face. Then, with obvious reluctance, she held the bottle out to Carolyn.

“No,” Carolyn said. “Keep it. I got it for you.”

Jennifer didn’t say anything, but she smiled.

“Are you done?”

Jennifer nodded. “I think so. Margaret is set, at any rate. She’s heard the call.” She raised her voice. “David? Will there be anything else?”

David’s back was to them. He was standing at the edge of the bluff, looking across Highway 78 to the entrance to Garrison Oaks. He waved his hand distractedly.

Jennifer shrugged. “I guess that means I’m done.” She turned to Carolyn. “So, what do you think?”

“I’m not sure,” Carolyn said. “If Father is out among the Americans, I can’t find him. Have you learned anything?”

“Michael says he’s not among the beasts, living or dead.”

“And the others?”

Jennifer shrugged. “So far it’s just us three. They’ll be along presently.” She stretched out on the grass and rested her head on Carolyn’s lap. “Thank you for the—what did you call it?”

“Listerine.”

“Lis-ter-ine,” Jennifer said. “Thank you.” She closed her eyes.

All that afternoon the other librarians filtered in, singly and in pairs. Some carried burdens. Alicia held the black candle, still burning as it had in the golden ruin at the end of time. Rachel and her phantom children whispered among themselves of the futures that would never be. The twins, Peter and Richard, watched intently as the librarians filled out the twelve points of the abbreviated circle, studying some deep order that everyone else was blind to. The sweat on their ebony skin glistened in the firelight.

Finally, just before sunset, Margaret stretched a pale, trembling hand up into the light.

“She’s back,” Jennifer said to no one in particular.

David walked over to the grave, smiling. He reached down and took Margaret’s hand. With his help she rose on shaky legs, dirt raining down around her. David lifted her out of the grave. “Hello, my love!”

She stood before him, no taller than his chest, and tilted her head back, smiling. David dusted off the worst of the dirt, then lifted her by the hips and kissed her, long and deep. Her small feet dangled limp six inches over the black earth. It occurred to Carolyn that she could not think what color garment Margaret had been buried in. It might have been ash-gray, or the bleached-out-flesh tones of a child’s doll left too long in the sun. Whatever color it actually was, it had blended well against Margaret herself. *She is barely here anymore. All that’s really left of her is the smell.*

Margaret wobbled for a moment, then sat down in the pile of soft earth next to the grave. David tipped her a wink and ran his tongue along his teeth. Margaret giggled. Jennifer gagged again.

David squatted down next to Margaret and ruffled her dusty black hair. “Well?” he called out to Richard and Peter and the rest, “What are you waiting for? Everyone’s here now. Take your places.”

They were gathered into a rough circle. Carolyn watched David. He eyed the bull, uneasy, and in the end stood so that his back was to it. *Even now, he doesn’t like looking at it.* Not that she blamed him.

“Very well,” he said. “You have all had your month. Who has answers for me?”

No one spoke.

“Margaret? Where is Father?”

“I do not know,” she said. “He is not in the forgotten lands. He does not wander the outer darkness.”

“So, he’s not dead, then.”

“Perhaps not.”

“*Perhaps?* What does that mean?”

Margaret was silent for a long moment. “If he died in the Library, it would be different.”

“Different how? He wouldn’t go to the forgotten lands?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

Margaret looked shifty. “I shouldn’t say.”

David rubbed his temples. “Look, I’m not asking you to talk about your catalog, but . . . he’s been gone a long time. We have to consider all possibilities. Just in general terms, what would happen if he *had* died inside the Library? Would he—”

“Don’t be *ridiculous*,” Carolyn said, not quite shouting. Her face was red. “Father can’t be *dead*—not in the Library, and not anywhere bloody else!” The others muttered agreement. “He’s . . . he’s *Father*.”

David’s face clouded, but he let it go. “Margaret? What do you think?”

Margaret shrugged, not really interested. “Carolyn is probably right.”

“Mmm.” He didn’t seem convinced. “Rachel? Where is Father?”

“We do not know,” she said, spreading her hands out to indicate the silent ranks of ghost children arrayed behind her. “He is in no possible future that we can see.”

“Alicia? What about the actual future? Is he there?”

“No.” She ran her fingers through her dirty-blond hair, nervous. “I checked all the way to the heat death of normal space. Nothing.”

“He’s not in any futures and he’s not dead. How is that possible?”

Alicia and Rachel looked at each other and shrugged. “It is indeed a riddle,” Rachel said. “I cannot account for it.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“Perhaps you ask the wrong questions.”

“Do I?” David walked over to her, grinning dangerously, jaw muscles jumping. “Do I *really*?”

Rachel went pale. “I didn’t mean—”

David let her grovel for a moment, then touched a finger to her lips. “Later.” She sank to the ground, trembling visibly in the moonlight.

“Peter, you’re meant to be good with all that abstract crap. Figures and so forth. What do you think?”

Peter hesitated. “There are aspects of Father’s work that I was never allowed to see—”

“Father kept things from all of us. Answer my question.”

“When he disappeared he was working on something called regression completeness,” Peter said. “It’s the notion that the universe is structured in such a way that no matter how many mysteries you solve, there is always a deeper mystery behind it. Father seemed very—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Do you know where Father is or don’t you?”

“Not exactly, but if you follow that line of thinking, it might explain—”

“Never mind.”

“But—”

“*Stop talking.* Carolyn, get with Peter later and translate whatever he says into something normal people can understand.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Michael, what about the Far Hill? Was there any sign there?”

The Far Hill was the heaven of the Forest God, where all the clever little beasts went when they died—something like that, at any rate. Carolyn hadn’t been aware that it was real. For that matter, she hadn’t been certain that the Forest God was real until just now.

“No. Not there.” His speech was better now.

“And the Forest God? Is he—”

“The Forest God is sleeping. He has massed no armies against us. Among his pack there were the usual intrigues, but nothing that concerns us directly. I see no reason to think—”

“Think? You? That’s almost funny.” He turned away. “Emily, what about—”

“There’s something else,” Michael said. “We are to have a visitor.”

David glared at him. “A visitor? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You hit me in the mouth,” Michael said. “You told me to be quiet.”

David’s jaw muscles jumped again. “Now I’m telling you to not be quiet,” he said. “Who is coming?”

“Nobununga.”

“What? *Here?*”

“He is concerned for Father’s safety,” Michael said. “He wishes to investigate.”

“Oh *fuck,*” said Carolyn. This was startled out of her—she hadn’t

expected Nobununga quite so soon. But she had the presence of mind to speak softly, and in English. No one noticed.

“When will he arrive?”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “He . . . he will arrive, um . . . when he gets here?”

David gritted his teeth. “Do we have any idea when that might be?”

“It will be later.”

“Like, when, exactly?” His hand curled into a fist.

“He doesn’t understand, David,” Jennifer said softly. “He doesn’t see time the way people do. Not anymore. Hitting him won’t change that.”

Michael, panicky now, flitted his eyes from Jennifer to David. “The mice have seen him! He approaches!”

David unclenched his fist. He rubbed his temples. “Never mind,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. He’s even right. Nobununga will arrive when he arrives. All we can do is make him welcome. Peter, Richard—collect the totems.” The twins bounced up, scrambling to obey.

“Carolyn—I need you to go back into America. We need an innocent heart. We will offer it to Nobununga when he arrives. Do you think you can handle that?”

“An innocent heart? In America?” She hesitated. “Possibly.”

Misunderstanding, he said, “It’s easy. Just cut through the ribs.” He scissored his fingers through the air. “Like so. If you can’t get it out yourself, send for me.”

“Yes, David.”

“That will be all for tonight. Carolyn, you can go whenever you’re ready. The rest of you stay close.” He glanced at the bull, uneasy. “Richard, Peter, be quick about it. I want to, um, get back to Mrs. McGillicutty’s,” he said, winking at Margaret. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

Rachel sat down on the ground. Her children crowded around her. In a moment she was entirely hidden behind them. Carolyn wanted to speak with Michael, but he and his cougars had faded into the woods. Jennifer unrolled her sleeping skins and lay back on them with a groan. Margaret drifted into orbit around David.

David rummaged around in his knapsack for a moment. “Here you

go, Margaret," he said. "I brought you a gift." He pulled out the severed head of an old man, hoisting him by his long, wispy beard. He swung the head back and forth a couple of times, then tossed it to her.

Margaret caught it with both hands, grunting a bit at the weight. She grinned, delighted. Her teeth were black. "Thank you."

David sat down beside her and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "How long will it be?" he called over his shoulder.

"An hour," Richard said, running his fingers through the bowl of totems—Michael's hair of the Forest God, the black candle, the scrap of Carolyn's dress, stiff with blood, a drop of wax from the black candle. These would be used as nodes of an n -dimensional tracking tool that they were quite sure—well . . . fairly sure, at least—would point them toward Father. Well . . . probably. Carolyn had her doubts.

"No more than that," Peter agreed.

Margaret took the head into her lap and began fussing over it—caressing its cheeks, cooing at it, smoothing its bushy eyebrows. After a moment of her attentions the dead man's eyelids fluttered, then opened.

"Blue eyes!" Margaret exclaimed. "Oh, David, thank you!"

David shrugged.

Carolyn snuck a peek. Perhaps the man's eyes had been blue once, but now mostly what they were was sunken and filmed over. But she recognized him. He had been a minor courtier in one of Father's cabinets and, once, the prime minister of Japan. Normally such a man would be protected. *David must be feeling bold.* The head blinked again and fastened his eyes upon Margaret. His tongue stirred and his lips began to move, though of course without lungs he could make no sound.

"What is he saying?" David asked. After six weeks of banishment, most of them had picked up at least a smattering of American, but Carolyn was the only one who spoke Japanese.

Carolyn leaned in close, her nose wrinkling at the smell. She tilted her head and touched the man's cheeks. "*Moo ichido itte kudasai, Yamada-san.*" The dead man tried again, pleading to her with sightless eyes.

Carolyn sat back and arranged her hands in her lap demurely, left over right, in such a way that the palm of each hand concealed the fingers of the other from view. Her expression was peaceful, even pleasant. She

knew that Emily could read her thoughts easily. David, too, could sense thoughts, at least the basic flavor. He knew when someone bore him ill will. In battle he could peer into the minds of his enemies and see their strategies, see the weapons that might be raised against him. Carolyn suspected that he might be able to look deeper if there were a need. But it didn't matter. If Emily or David chose to look into Carolyn's thoughts, they would find only the desire to help.

Of course, *genuine* emotion is the very essence of self. It cannot ever be unfelt, cannot be ignored, cannot even be rechanneled for very long.

But with practice and care, it may be hidden.

"He is asking about Chieko and Kiko-chan," Carolyn said. "I think they are his daughters. He wants to know if they are safe."

"Ah," David said. "Tell him I gutted them for the practice. Their mother as well."

"Is it true?"

David shrugged.

"*Sorera wa anzen desu, Yamada-san. Ima yasumu desu nee,*" Carolyn said, telling him that they were safe, telling him that he could rest now. The dead man allowed his eyes to droop. A single tear trembled on the edge of his left eyelid. Margaret studied it with bright, greedy eyes. When it broke free and ran down Yamada's cheek she dipped her head, birdlike, and licked it up with a single deft flick of her tongue.

The dead man puffed his cheeks and blew them out, the softest, saddest sound Carolyn had ever heard. David and Margaret laughed together.

Carolyn's smile was just the right amount of forced. Perhaps she was overcome with pity for the poor man? Or maybe it was the smell. Again, anyone who bothered to peek in on her thoughts would find only concern for Father and a sincere—if slightly nervous—desire to please David. But her fingertips trembled with the memory of faint, fading vibrations carried down the shaft of a brass spear, and in her heart the hate of them blazed like a black sun.